ATHAWAR HOUSE

BY

K. NAGARAJAN

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TO

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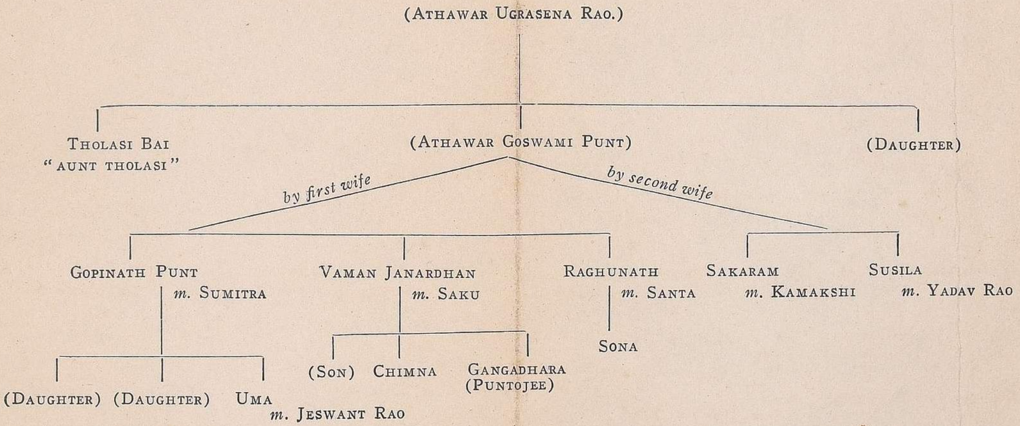
but for whom this book would not have been written

ATHAWAR FAMILY TREE.



N.B.—*Characters within brackets do not come into the story.*

THE CHUDAMANI FAMILY.

CHUDAMANI ANANTARAMA AIYAR.

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ANANTAKRISHNA AIYAR.

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VENKATRAMANI

PART ONE
1919 - 1921

CHAPTER I.

Dawn was breaking behind the paddy-fields which framed the village of Syamalapuri and fitful shafts of light gleamed among the coconut palms which clustered on its outskirts. A gentle breeze was blowing and the air was so crisp and cold that the early morning plunge in the river required considerable effort of will. It was the month of *Dhanus,* the heart of the Indian cold weather, when the Sun reigned in *Sagittarius* and early morning prayers were the feature of the season. Already the village was astir; the bells of Syamala-devi's temple were ringing out, as a sign that the *diparadanai* was taking place when lighted camphor and saffron would be passed round among the assembled throng of worshippers. It was like a division bell which summoned the dawdlers to make haste to receive the sacred offerings. There was a great scurrying to and fro and, shortly afterwards, men and women could be seen issuing forth from the temple holding plates of burnished brass, laden with fruit, powdered saffron and *pansupari,* to be distributed among the family at home.

Foremost among the crowd shambled along, in evident haste, a pot-bellied, sandal-smeared, round-faced man, holding in his upraised hand a small *guindy* of water from the temple well which he needs must carry home to use in his own particular worship of his home-god, *Hayagriva.* But Brihaspati Venkatappa was too valuable a person to be allowed to pass along

without interruption. Besides being official astrologer to the family of Athawar, he was the man whom all the village consulted in its affairs.

One eager lady, in a bright red *sari,* barred the way. She was returning from the temple and, holding her brass tray of coconut and betel in front of her, asked him what the reigning star of the day was.

"*Ardhra* till noon, *Punarvasu* thereafter. An auspicious day. A child born this day will come to high estate."

He knew the cause of the lady's anxiety; she was expecting her daughter to be confined in the course of the day.

"But, *āchari* . . . . . . "

But Venkatappa was in a hurry and had passed on, picking his way among the intricate decorative patterns drawn with rice-meal in front of the houses and the long rows of the bell-shaped pumpkin flowers, which fluttered gaily in the breeze all along the line. A bright-eyed girl came along in a petticoat of figured chintz, leading her little brother by the hand, and asked:

"*Māma,* mother wants to know if she can start baby's new treatment to-day?"

A shade of annoyance crossed the astrologer's face.

"Surely, she can. I have told her so ten times already," he said and hastened on his way.

At the corner, where the latest abomination—a coffee-house which lured men into breaking their fast unwashed and unshriven—reared its ill-fitting wooden planks which did duty for a door, he saw drawn up the double-bullock bandy of the Athawars. The driver,

a bare-chested, dark-skinned man, with the limbs of a gladiator, joined his palms in salutation and said:

"Master wishes you to come round to the house and see him as soon as you can."

"What is the matter, Sadayan?"

"I don't know, Sir. The big master asked me to take the cart and fetch the doctor. On the way, he said, I could leave a message for you."

"I suppose the lady is well?" asked Venkatappa, referring to Athawar Gopinath Punt's wife, a chronic invalid, whom the doctor was regularly fetched twice a week to see.

"Very much as usual, Sir."

"Any news from Mysore?"

"None that I know of, Sir. Chudamani Anantarama Aiyar comes to-day. He is expected to bring news."

"Good!" said Venkatappa, and went on.

The village gossip, an interfering individual who made it his business to know everything about everybody in the village, called out:

"Maybe Gopinath wants to consult you about the house he is thinking of buying."

Venkatappa turned with a start and just nodding his head proceeded on his way. He had a busy day in front of him and could not stay gossiping. Moreover, he knew that it must be about the house that he had been sent for.

"Why on earth should old Gopinath seek to desert his ancestral home and move to town!" he mused. "Well! Gopinath is a good man and can be trusted to know what he is doing. In any case it would be sheer waste of money. Still, if that is destiny . . . . . ."

Venkatappa was right. Athawar Gopinath Punt, present head of the Athawars, was thinking of acquiring a house in town; his mind was nearly made up, but that did not settle the matter; he had to consult the family about it. By all the laws of the family circle this had to be done; the observance of this custom made for the continuance of the family; its neglect for its disintegration. And Gopinath believed in carrying the family with him. For one thing he loved the line of peace which, experience had taught him, was the line of safety. Moreover, he carried weight and could always have his way; he knew the ropes, was dependable and never did anything in a hole-and-corner fashion. So much so, that whenever he brought up a matter for the consideration of the family they contented themselves with the barest scrutiny and never ripped it open or peered at it with too critical an eye. Like a friendly Customs official, lazily prodding luggage which he has made up his mind to pass, they just asked a question here or offered a suggestion there and said that, if brother Gopinath thought that a thing should be done, why, it should be. And, in fairness to Gopinath, it must be said that their trust was entirely justified and he never let the family down.

It had been, therefore, something in the nature of a surprise to Gopinath that when, in accordance with the family practice, he announced his intention of buying a house in town, there should be murmurs of dissent. A house in town! What did they want with one? asked his old aunt Tholasi Bai. Was not the ancestral house where generations of Athawars had

lived and flourished enough for them? She was surprised, she *was*, she said with emphasis and shook her aged head.

"A needless luxury, an almost certain path to ruin," pontifically declared the second brother, Vaman Janardhan, an intense believer in inevitable disaster. Money was Vaman's constitutional obsession and his mind leapt to the financial side of any given question like a bull to a flaming red rag. Figures arranged themselves before his mind's eye in dismal rows and, by some eerie arithmetic, worked themselves out into results which brought conclusive ruin in their wake. He was abreast of all the insolvency proceedings in the District Court of Kedaram. The study of these was his one relief and recreation and his knowledge of the world was coloured by the history of persons who had passed through the Bankruptcy Court.

"A house in town!" went on Aunt Tholasi, recovering her composure. "It is unthinkable. Let us leave that to the Nilkars and Nimbalkars, with their newfangled ways. Syamalapuri will do for us, at least for the rest of *our* lives. Here the Athawars have lived for ages, under the protection of our own Syamaladevi, the goddess who has watched over them ever since they came over with Ekoji."

"But, *athya*", said Gopinath, addressing his aunt, "the Devi will continue to watch over us wherever we may happen to be. There can be no doubt of that."

"No lack of jurisdiction, surely," said Raghunath Rao, the youngest of the three brothers.

"I am worried," said Aunt Tholasi, puckering her eyebrows. "Once you go to town, you will begin to

worship strange gods and you will forget the Devi. Oh! Gopinath, how can you think of such a thing? Aren't you the trustee of the Devi's temple?"

"Going to town does not mean abandoning the trust, *athya*. And, after all, Kedaram is only fifteen miles from here."

"But Kedaram is not Syamalapuri. Daily worship at the temple would be out of the question. The tank, the river Cauvery, the temple bells and the paddy-fields, how I shall miss them! You may go, if you like, but leave me here with Vaman and his wife to look after me. I cannot bear to leave Syamalapuri."

"Please do not talk like that, *athya*. If we go to town, we go with you, or not at all. Of that you may be sure."

A little mollified, Aunt Tholasi turned to practicalities.

"How much do they want for the house?"

"Twelve thousand," replied Gopinath. "Surve wanted fifteen at first and then took off a thousand, but I beat it down to twelve."

"It is not worth six," said Vaman in an undertone. "It was built ages ago."

"Which house is it, Vaman? I haven't got it quite clear in my mind," asked Aunt Tholasi Bai.

"Ramanath Bhat's house. It originally belonged to the Deshmukhs. The house at the end of the Main Car Street."

"I see now," said Aunt Tholasi, "it is certainly a fine house and a lucky one too. There can be no doubt of that. I quite well remember the Senior Rani's niece

being married from that house. Even then it was over fifty years old.

"So the house should have been built about the beginning of the century. Born 1805, still going strong," said Raghunath. "That beats Johnny Walker."

"What is Johnny Walker?" asked Gopinath.

"A celebrated brand of whisky which the English love."

"Where do you learn such things, Raghunath?" asked Aunt Tholasi, in pained surprise. "What have we got to do with English drinks?"

Vaman put his oar in. "Nothing so far as we are concerned. But Raghunath is a *dorai,* and he must talk of them, even if he can't drink them. This is the result of his being a B.A."

"How touchy you are, *athya,*" said Raghunath, good-humouredly. "Saying 'fire' will not burn the mouth."

"What do you think of the present proposal, Raghunath?" asked Gopinath, anxious for peace.

"It is a capital idea. Go one better, *dada,* and build a nice, airy bungalow in the Extension." Raghunath set up for being modern. "Away from the reach of mosquitoes, mice and men."

"Also from bazaar, temple and tank. That would never do, Raghunath," said Gopinath decisively.

"I rather like Raghunathji's idea," said Sumitra, Gopinath's wife. "Why go and get baked in an old house in town, like going to Kashi and still not getting rid of your *karma.*"

"You do not know, Sumitra," countered Gopinath patiently. "It is always best to go in for a house which has stood the test of time. A house which has brought luck to its owners. In buying houses, one should not take risks."

"That's true," agreed Aunt Tholasi, "the Deshmukhs were there for ages and were always on the crest of the wave. Never was there any lack of children or wealth. And, Deshmukh Mangesh Rao's wife, she was a luck-bringer, if there was one."

This touched a chord of recollection in Gopinath's wife. Collecting the runaway edge of her purple-and-gold *sari,* she said, "I know she used to make marvellous pumpkin *hulwas* and her gooseberry *murabas* were like nectar. I never missed her annual treat during *Gouri Puja.*"

"But will Mrs. Mangesh Rao come back from the dead to make *hulwas* and *murabas* for us when we go into that house, *vahini* Sumitra? I am perfectly satisfied with the *hulwas* and *murabas* which you make for us," said Raghunath.

"Or, say, with the *chutneys* which our Vaman's wife, Saku, makes for us. I don't think the Deshmukh lady ever made such *chutneys,* Vaman," said Gopinath propitiatingly.

Saku, Vaman's wife, muttered something to herself. Usually competent and kind, she had latterly developed a few angles; there was a new touch of sourness in her temper and she accepted compliments as if they were quinine pills. But she had a great reputation for pickling and preserving. She sat now at a distance slicing snake-gourd and brinjals for the mid-day meal.

"What does Saku think of the proposal, *athya?*" asked Gopinath good-humouredly.

"Who cares what Saku thinks?" snapped that lady. "What happiness is there for me in life? I care for nothing. If this unfortunate child of mine is married to somebody somehow, I shall die in peace."

"Don't have any fears on dear Ambu's score, Saku. The doctor says that when she grows bigger the trouble will vanish. It is only some defect in the thyroid gland." But even as he spoke, Gopinath thought to himself. "She certainly does seem very queer in her head at times." To encourage himself, he went on brightly, "Vaman, we should take Ambu to Madras and show her to Dr. Reddi. We must see about it after *Sivaratri*.

"Don't rely on doctors alone, Gopinath. Throw the burden on Syamaladevi. To that anchor we must hold. I have taken a vow that I will go to Benares and feed a thousand Brahmins if Ambu should be cured," said Aunt Tholasi Bai.

"We are in your hands, dear *athya*," reverently answered Gopinath. "But I would not rule out doctors. As they say, cures are effected by *mani, mantra* and *oushadam*. Prayers, incantations and medicine, all three have their place in the treatment of the sick. You know the doctor here has promised to examine her by X-ray."

"He promised that long ago, but we do not find the time to go to him. We are so taken up with our sowings and harvestings and our feasts and festivals. I wish the poor child were dead and all our sufferings

at an end," said Vaman's wife, in an access of mortification. This was at least a half-truth and went home.

"Saku, don't talk like that. Gopinath will see about it. Is it not as much his concern as yours? Don't vex yourself so," comforted Aunt Tholasi.

"Have no fears, Saku," said Gopinath reassuringly. "One reason why I want to buy this house in town is that we may all go and live there and keep in daily touch with the doctors. This idea of mine is not an idle fancy. One does not catch new ideas at my age just for the fun of the thing. Let us buy this house and all will be well. I know it will bring us luck. I feel it in my bones."

As Gopinath said this, the temple bells pealed for worship. Gopinath's face beamed with joy. It was a sign from Heaven that his prophetic bones had counselled aright. Aunt Tholasi was impressed, too. To doubt in the face of divine sanction would be blasphemous.

"If Syamaladevi wills it, then so be it!" she said.

Even Vaman appeared tongue-tied. But that was only for a second. Recovering, he spluttered, "It will be a challenge flung in the face of gods. For Heaven's sake, drop the idea. Let us not make new experiments. At any moment, the Athawar curse may manifest itself."

Everybody winced. The family rarely, if ever, referred to the curse which their ancestor Ugrasena's wife had laid on the family.

Gopinath checked him. "Don't drag that in, please, Vaman. The curse has nothing to do with house-

buying. It isn't as if any of us was thinking of taking a second wife."

"Mine is a voice in the wilderness and nobody will listen to me. A new house generally brings disaster in its train."

"Oh! cheer up, Vaman. Something tells me this house will bring us luck."

As Gopinath spoke, the friendly bells of Syamaladevi pealed again. And, at the same moment, the servant announced Brihaspati Venkatappa.

CHAPTER II.

Brihaspati Venkatappa entered with his shambling gait and handed to the assembled family the consecrated saffron powder which he had brought with him. They received it reverently and applied it to their foreheads. Gopinath offered a cup of fresh milk to the astrologer, which was all that he liked to take of a morning.

Watching him drink it with relish, Gopinath said, "It is very long, now, Venkatappa, since you told us anything about our fortunes. It is time you gave us another reading."

"I am ever at your service, Gopinath," replied the astrologer willingly. "I have already told you that you are now passing through one of the best periods in your life."

"That was in August last, I think, when I bought the Surves' land. I want you to come nearer home and tell me about the present, or rather, the immediate future."

"With pleasure," said Venkatappa, and called for the cadjan-leaf collection of the family horoscopes. Squatting down on a rattan-mat he started making calculations and gave out his readings with all the impressiveness, which the occasion as well as his own standing as the hereditary astrologer of the Athawars demanded.

Running over the planetary positions in Gopinath's horoscope, he said, "You are passing through the *antardasa* of Venus under the major influence of Mars.

Mars is the lord of the fourth house which governs all matters relating to lands and houses; and, further, Mars is in the ascendant in your birth constellation. Venus is strongly placed and it therefore follows that you will have luck in all that concerns that side of the family affairs." Then, looking round, with his spectacles lowered on the bridge of the nose, "It is going to be an excellent time."

"How is the excellence going to manifest itself? Am I going to light upon a hidden treasure?" asked Gopinath, jokingly.

"It may be that, or even better," answered Venkatappa. "All that I can say is that new gains are indicated. Gains in the way of lands, houses, and, let me see," he continued reflectively, "Venus is the lord of the fifth house, and, therefore, in the way of children."

"That is interesting. I am getting on for fifty and my last child is fourteen. You astrologers are a funny lot," said Gopinath, obviously amused.

"So far it has not pleased Syamaladevi to send you a son. May it be her will to send you one at least now," said Aunt Tholasi, a shade of sadness in her voice.

"Let the Devi make up for lost time, then. There is very little time to lose," said Raghunath, looking up lazily over the pages of the previous day's *Hindu,* a merry twinkle in his eye.

"You look out for yourself, Raghunath," said Venkatappa. "It is time you produced a son. You and your only daughter! You are past thirty and you should not let Anantakrishna beat you after all."

Chudamani Anantakrishna, the son of that Anantarama whose coming the cartman had announced, was a friend and contemporary of Raghunath's and the proud father of a handsome boy.

"So far as I am concerned, I am game for a son. You try and keep the family gods in good-humour, Venkatappa," answered Raghunath pleasantly.

"How frivolous you are, Raghunath!" said Aunt Tholasi in mild reproof. One did not joke about gods in that way.

Gopinath said, addressing the astrologer, "Honestly, Venkatappa, I am not pining for a son. I have three daughters and, if I get the last of them comfortably married and settled, I shall be quite content. As for sons, Vaman has already two and if Raghunath should only take your hint, he may have one or two and they will suffice to carry on the family. But, tell me, is the present time propitious for house-buying?"

"I should think so, indeed," replied Venkatappa, "but let me make sure," and he proceeded to examine the horoscopes of the brothers. After some time he announced, "The signs are altogether favourable. You will buy a new house and it will be followed by a period of prosperity. In fact, a period of unusual splendour is indicated.

"What do you make of Vaman's horoscope?" asked Gopinath.

Vaman, usually scornful of the pretensions of astrologers, not because of any reasoned distrust of the science, but because they cost good money, pricked up his ears and prepared to listen. His wife, Saku, stopped on her way to the store-room, with the air of

one who felt that it did not matter one way or the other, so long as it was manifest she was to be the plaything of a cruel Fate.

"Saturn is commencing his rule," calculated the astrologer. "He is in the fourth house and weak and debilitated. That, however, does not matter. Saturn is in conjunction with Jupiter who too is in the fourth house, of which he happens to be the lord and owner, and that is a very good sign, indeed."

"But, tell us, Venkatappa, will Vaman's daughter, Ambu, get well?" asked Aunt Tholasi.

"Why worry about Ambu? What matters it if she gets well or ill? Let us see about buying a house and getting relief from our present houseless condition," snapped Saku. The household squirmed: confound Saku and her unkind remarks.

"I have repeatedly told you that Ambu will begin to get well after six months," said Venkatappa, who knew how uncomfortable Saku made the long-suffering Athawars.

"Let her get well or let her not. I hope for nothing from man. I have left everything to God," said Saku acidly.

"Ever the best way, Saku Bai," remarked Venkatappa pointedly. "Shift the burden on to Him and you will have no cause to complain."

Saku Bai shrugged her shoulders, drew her *sari* round them and proceeded to the store-room.

"How is Raghunath's horoscope?" asked Gopinath.

Apart from his curiosity to know what light it threw on the matter which was exercising him at the moment, it was desirable that, as the head of the family, he

should display some interest in all the brothers impartially. The astrologer made a quick reply.

"In one sense, it is the best of all," he said. "His daughter is a most lucky child."

As at a signal, the whole family turned effusively to pet the child. Sona, the four-year old daughter of Raghunath, was engaged in feeding a wooden doll, her uncle Gopinath's present to her on his return from a visit to Kedaram. She resisted the intrusion on her mothering of the doll, but once in Gopinath's arms, she broke into chubby smiles. Sona was an exceedingly pretty child, on whom everyone doted, except Vaman. "Safe to be petted and spoiled," he used to carp. If ever anybody handed Vaman the baby to hold, he would receive her gingerly in his arms and hand her back at the earliest opportunity.

"Now, Venkatappa," said Raghunath, affecting boredom, "It's Gopinath who wants to buy a house. Look into his horoscope by all means. But what on earth has my horoscope or Vaman's or, for that matter Sakaram's, got to do with it?"

Sakaram was their half-brother, Goswami Punt's son by his second wife, and, therefore, of the family. A handsome, sad-faced young man, he sat apart on a swing, tuning a *vina*.

"What on earth have they to do with it!" retorted Venkatappa, in surprise. "What on earth have they *not* to do with it? Take for instance, this house business. Gopinath is not buying it for himself alone. You are all going to share it and if there is anything in predestination, your horoscopes should contain indications of the acquisition about to be made."

Gopinath, who sat twiddling his rosary, thought it was time to bring back the discussion to the matter on hand. He asked, "So your verdict is in favour of buying the house?"

"Absolutely and without qualification. Only, do not forget old Venkatappa, when you remove to Kedaram."

"Forget you, Venkatappa! Not in this life or in the next either. We shall take you with us, Venkatappa," asserted Gopinath.

As he spoke, the child, Raghunath's daughter, Sona, sneezed twice. Almost at the same moment a couple of donkeys in the street brayed in concert. More convincing signs of divine approval were never vouchsafed to blundering man.

At this auspicious moment, a new and most welcome visitor was announced. It was Chudamani Anantarama Aiyar at last, whose visit had been looked forward to with such eagerness by the family. He was expected to bring news of the proposal which was on foot to marry Gopinath's last daughter, Uma, to the son of Ananda Rao, a rich landowner of Mysore. Uma was on the verge of fourteen and her marriage could not be put off any longer. Anantarama Aiyar had known Ananda Rao and his father before him and the Athawars could not hope for a more distinguished ambassador to act on their behalf. At the sight of his double-bullock cart, they rushed out to receive him. Arrived at the hall, all of them prostrated themselves before him and carrying their hands to their ears, punctiliously announced their names coupled with that of Kausika, the sage from whom they claimed spiritual descent.

Anantarama Aiyar, a gracious, grey-haired old man of seventy-five, embraced the brothers affectionately, and, in a voice that faltered a little, pronounced a blessing on them. He asked after all the family and answered Aunt Tholasi's particular questions about the health and welfare of his own children and grandchildren. Then addressing Gopinath, he said,

"Well, Gopinath, God has been very good to us. Ananda Rao is quite agreeable to the proposal. He is even enthusiastic about it. He is anxious to have the marriage celebrated as early as possible."

He spoke in easy, colloquial Marathi. Although a Tamil Brahmin himself, he was perfectly at home in Marathi.

"We knew it would turn out all right when you undertook to go and meet Ananda Rao, Uncle Anantaram," said Gopinath. The brothers called him uncle, for he had been more than a brother to their father, Goswami Punt, his contemporary and lifelong friend.

"Did you see the boy?" asked Aunt Tholasi.

"I did and was very favourably impressed with him."

Gopinath's daughter, Uma, happened to come at the moment and Raghunath teased her.

"Is the boy squint-eyed, Uncle?" he asked mischievously.

Aunt Tholasi asked Uma to prostrate herself before Anantarama Aiyar. Anantarama Aiyar uttered a blessing and said, "No squint-eyes for Uma. Jeswant Rao is well-set-up, very good-looking and a good scholar."

Uma, a pretty, bright-eyed girl, ran away in confused shyness.

"What is the next step, Uncle?" asked Gopinath.

"To fix an auspicious day and start for Mysore. Hand the *lagna patrika* to them and make a formal offer of marriage and then proceed with the arrangements for the wedding."

Anantarama Aiyar had not finished his sentence before the grandfather clock on the wall struck twelve. This gift of the Maharajah Sivaji had been a most dependable ally of the Athawars ever since it came into the house. No project to which it had given its chiming approval had ever miscarried. Anantarama Aiyar looked at the clock, pleasure in his eyes. Gopinath saw what was passing in his mind. He said,

"The omens throughout have been very good, Uncle."

"We are in God's hands, Gopinath," said Anantarama Aiyar, reverently.

"Say, rather, the gods are in our hands," snapped Vaman. "They respect our least wish. They are a very obliging lot. This very day they have given their approval of a hare-brained scheme for buying a house in town."

Anantarama Aiyar looked at Gopinath questioningly; the head of the Athawars said rather uncomfortably.

"I was going to mention it. It is about that house at Kedaram I once spoke to you about. You remember, Ramanath Bhat's house. It seems one of the defendants in the temple litigation is short of funds and Bhat proposes to sell one of his houses to raise them."

"Yes. He was on the look-out for a fit Komatti to

impale on the spear and we offer ourselves for the sacrifice," said Vaman hotly, unable to contain himself.

Anantarama Aiyar tried to reconcile Vaman to the idea. "It happens to us all, Vaman. When my own son, Anantakrishnan, decided that I should move to town, I could not bring myself to agree. But there was my grandson, Venkatramani, to consider. His education was an important consideration and we thought it was best I should move to Kedaram and look after the boy when he went to school."

"It is the same thing here. Vaman's boys are growing up and we have to attend to their education. And there is Ambu. We cannot get her properly treated here. She has to be under the doctor's observation and we cannot be rushing to Kedaram and back every other day. Times have changed and we have to change with them too," said Gopinath, the practical philosopher.

"I think it is all inevitable. Vaman, of course, is extremely conservative. So was I. I think we are cast in the same mould," said Anantarama Aiyar, diplomatically.

"The education of *my* children need be no consideration." Vaman was grudging to the last. "Gopinath thinks they are to be B.A.'s and B.L.'s, but I am not so sure about it. Even if they should be, they are safe to follow the family tradition and stay at home, cooling their heels."

This was a hit at Raghunath. Raghunath was a B.A. and a stay-at-home, an unforgivable offence in the eyes of Vaman, who had hounded him on to turn his degree to account by getting employment under the Government. Raghunath had tried but had given up

the attempt after one effort—an effort that had hurt him sorely. For three days he had waited in the Collector's verandah being accommodated by a patronising *peon* on a dealwood box where the *peons* kept their turbans and cummerbunds. When the Collector finally called him in for a five-minutes' interview, Raghunath went in with a sinking heart. He had never before met an Englishman at close quarters and the prolonged wait had demoralised him. He went into the Presence, *salaamed* awkwardly and managed to mumble a set speech wherein he recounted, in the manner of an earlier day, his family history and his own academic qualifications. The Collector declined to be impressed and told him brusquely that if he had any stuff in him he might show it as a taluq office clerk on twenty-five rupees a month. That was the end of it. Raghunath returned home flattened out and there remained.

Anantarama Aiyar sat watching with his wise old eyes: he knew the exact amount of agreement and difference among the brothers: he knew Raghunath and Vaman even better than they knew themselves. Pacifically, he said, "The times have changed, Vaman. Hereafter, our children will come into their own. It would be well worth our while to give them all that we can in the way of education."

"Look at the Government of India Act, 1919," said Raghunath sourly.

"Well," the old man smiled. "Perhaps I was thinking of that."

Gopinath said, like one in doubt, "Raghunath thinks that is all eyewash. He says it won't take us very far."

Anantarama Aiyar turned a questioning look at Raghunath, whose answer came swift. "It is all bunkum, uncle. When I first read the declaration of August, 1917, I thought that the leopard, after all was going to change its spots. But it was all a wild hope, I have since discovered."

"Why Raghunath? Nothing has happened to alter the position since then. Britain seems to be in earnest. Else, do you think they would have sent out the Secretary of State to see things for himself and draft a constitution for us?"

Raghunath had a number of conclusive answers ready but he did not like to debate the point with the venerable Anantarama Aiyar. He merely said with a smile, "Well, the constitution has emerged and there is not much in it."

"This time you may find you are mistaken, Raghunath," said Anantarama Aiyar.

"I hope I am but, I am afraid, I am hard to convince. I have followed the proceedings with care ever since 1917, when the Secretary of State came out. Almost the first thing they did at Madras was to insult Mrs. Besant. They gave a garden-party at Government House and refused to invite her, though they proposed to let bygones be bygones. Now it's 1919. After eighteen months of labour, they produce this pitiable little rat of a Government of India Act. Not content with all this, they go and shoot down defenceless people at Amritsar. I wonder you place any trust in the British, uncle. But you were always so charitable."

Raghunath shrugged. Fanatically devoted to

Mrs. Besant and her teachings, he had felt her recent vicissitudes, which included a period of interment by the Madras Government, almost with agony.

"You are wrong, Raghunath," Anantarama Aiyar pursued determinedly. "The British are not so bad as you imagine. I have seen them at close quarters. There are, of course, Englishmen and Englishmen, but, on the whole, they are fair-minded and just." He closed, at any rate, with conviction.

"Let us hope so," said Raghunath pleasantly.

Tactfully, and to the general relief, Gopinath suggested dinner.

CHAPTER III.

The idea once accepted, the business of house-acquiring went smoothly forward. The old house that had been the Deshmukhs' and was now to be the Athawars' stood half-way up the broad street leading to the cross-roads where lay the decorated temple-cars, in which Kedareswar made his half-yearly festival processions through the city. It was, in parts, uninhabitable, but Gopinath set about the task of renovation and repair and succeeded, within the space of three months, in recreating out of the rambling early nineteenth century building an airy, spacious and well-lighted house, a fit habitation for the Athawars.

Gopinath did all the spade work, slaving from morning to night; and when Raghunath came upon the scene as the *debris* were being removed and the final touches given and spoke in his superior B.A. style of colour-schemes and decorative effects, Gopinath ruled them all out. A simple coat of whitewash was enough. As to beautifying the building, there was time enough to think about it when they had money to spare. Defeated on his decorations, Raghunath had raised the question of a name. Gopinath could not understand the modern craze for naming houses in which people lived, but Raghunath, familiar with the outsides of the big bungalows at Adyar, was set upon having the house duly christened and suggested that it should be called Athawar House. Gopinath thought it would be a better idea to call it Syamala Nivas, after

their tutelary goddess. Vaman, supervising the removal of the *debris,* (he always shouldered such burdens with a sort of mournful zest), said morosely, "Call it Athawar Folly".

Gopinath, ever careful not to allow such trifles to be made the subject of serious discussion, was good-humoured as usual. "It won't do to advertise the Athawars' folly, Vaman. Let it be as Raghunath desires. Now, like a good fellow, have a look through the bricklayers' accounts. They are too complicated for me."

Vaman moved off mollified and, there being no one strongly against it, "Athawar House" it came to be. But the simple coat of whitewash did not suffice; Raghunath had his way to some extent and a sum was spent on paint and varnish and general decorations that made Vaman hold up his hands in horror. And by the time May came round, and with it the day of Uma's marriage, the house glistened like the bride who, decked in diamonds and gold lace, was now to be joined in wedlock to Moreshwar Jeswant Rao.

The wedding-day had been a sweltering noon but the clear and unclouded sky, lavender-blue and star-spangled, held the promise of a delicious night, the reward of the just gods for all the heat and haze of the daytime. The streets were thronged with people going from one wedding to another, to offer congratulations and to receive *pansupari.* Women, released for the duration of the marriage from the drudgery of cooking and housekeeping, sped lightfooted from bride's house to bridegroom's, carrying presents and invitations, dressed in *saris* in every colour of the rain-

bow. And, on the soft evening breeze, was borne the music of the *nagaswaram,* played to enliven newly-married couples and to speed them on their journey through life.

Outside Athawar House, an eager crowd was collected round the doors. On the verandahs and in the passage leading to the hall, men and women jostled each other for standing room. Standing on tip-toe, with craned necks and peering eyes, they strove to catch a glimpse of the celebrated nautch-girl, who was entertaining the Athawars and their guests. There were gathered in the hall Athawars of every degree, who had flocked to be present at the wedding of Gopinath Punt's daughter with the son of Ananda Rao of Mysore. An authentic Athawar from distant Satara was there in all the bravery of a red *puggree* and a ferocious-looking moustache, presumably a reversion to the original Athawar who had come in the train of the adventuring Ekoji and helped him to conquer the kingdom of Tanjore from the Nayak kings, the while his famous half-brother Sivaji, was causing confusion among the ranks of the Great Moghul. Gopinath sat at the head of the gathering, his chubby, genial face wreathed in smiles, pressing sweet drinks and *pansupari* on his guests, spicing them with remarks that tended towards the traditionally ribald. To his right sat Chudamani Anantarama Aiyar, manifestly happy at having brought about what, on all hands, was allowed to be a most desirable union and, by his sobering presence, preventing too roistering a manifestation of pleasure at the dancing that was going on.

At some distance, lower down, Rao Sahib Ananta-

krishna Aiyar, Anantarama Aiyar's Deputy Collector son, was engaged in fitful talk with his old friend and schoolfellow, Raghunath Rao. Between the two, despite great differences in tastes and outlook, a steady friendship subsisted.

Anantakrishna Aiyar had no love of dancing. Raghunath knew it and began to tease him about it.

"She is a lovely girl, Anantakrishna," he said.

"The more the pity," replied Anantakrishnan musing.

"She is different from the rest, you will notice. She dances divinely."

"Don't grow lyrical, Raghunath. It is bad enough that you allow her to come and exhibit herself here."

They relapsed into silence, reflecting, each in his own way, about dancing. Raghunath loved the art with an understanding fervour and he thought Anantakrishna Aiyar's attitude a vague prejudice, built on slender materials. In point of fact he was right, for Anantakrishna Aiyar had scarcely given two minutes' thought to the subject. It never came up for consideration in his departmental files. He considered dancing immoral and said so again now.

"Do not Europeans dance?" asked Raghunath mischievously. Anantakrishna was noted for his pro-British tendencies.

"They do, but there is a difference." Where the difference lay, he could not tell. He thought vaguely "East is East and West is West and so on."

Raghunath, detecting the comparison, took him up maliciously. "Yes, different in that the European always dances with everybody's wife except his own.

Nothing to beat the tango, the waltz and the fox-trot!"

These remarks made Anantakrishna Aiyar unhappy. He shrugged his shoulders and said, "You do not understand. You won't even if you can. You are prejudiced against Europeans. They have a high sense of honour."

"You bet they have," replied Raghunath, grinning.

Ananda Rao from Mysore, with his brothers and cousins, occupied pride of place among the chief guests. Dressed in coats and turbans of formal cut, they testified to the etiquette of the Mysore State, with its courtly forms and ceremonies. The ladies of their families were accommodated in an adjoining room attended by the Athawar ladies. Here Gopinath's wife, Sumitra, did the honours while Saku flitted about, as busy and unhappy as she could make herself. The room was a pool of colour, the women sitting rapt and silent, lost in admiration of the beautiful dancer and her yet more beautiful dancing. At the foot of the stairs sat Gopinath's half-brother, Sakaram. Just turned twenty-two, he was the handsomest of the Athawars, the gentlest and the most refined. His face, which in delicacy of feature and richness of colouring rivalled a girl's but was shadowed by a permanent touch of sadness, followed every movement of the dancer with the closest attention.

Raghunath, who loved him dearly, teased him. "Sakaram has lost himself. His soul has merged with Lalita's. I think we shall have to perform a surgical operation to separate the two."

Sakaram heard and smiled mechanically at Raghunath.

"He seems unable to take his eyes off her," laughed Anantakrishna. "Be careful, Sakaram. If your wife comes to know, there will be complications at home."

Sakaram smiled weakly but his sad face turned sadder. Raghunath nudged Anantakrishna Aiyar and whispered in his ear, "You have committed a *faux pas.*"

"I am sorry. What's the matter?" asked Anantakrishna in real distress.

"Sakaram's wife," replied Raghunath. "That devil. She gets sourer every day. She makes his life hell."

Anantakrishna murmured apologetic condolences. "Poor Sakaram!"

"And his sister, Susila married to a brute," pursued Raghunath. "I suppose it is the curse working."

"The curse? You don't seriously believe that?"

"Sometimes I do, Anantakrishna, sometimes I don't."

Athawar Ugrasena's wife had laid the curse on the family many years ago. Ugrasena had been happily married and had a flourishing family, but he needs must go and take a second wife. This second wife proved a handful and Ugrasena like many a widower remarried was a reed in her grasp. She turned out the first wife, who was chaste as Arundhati, just when she happened to be big with child, and the child was dead before it was born and the mother unable to bear the thought of all the suffering which the child had undergone, was herself taken ill and she died. With her dying breath she cursed the woman Ugrasena had taken to wife a second time. She also laid a curse on all future Athawars that if any one of them should

marry while he had a wife in existence or while there were children by an earlier wife, the second should come to no good. She was a pure-minded woman and when such a one curses in agony, the gods see to it that the curse works itself out—a fact that the father of Sakaram and Susila, marrying a second time in his first wife's lifetime, had overlooked.

"It has been a pretty effective curse anyway" said Raghunath. "Ugrasena's grandson disregarded it, married a second time without reason and suffered in consequence. My own grandfather took a second wife when he had children by the first wife and paid the penalty. We thought that in my father's case the curse was abrogated, but no, it only appears to have been dormant. It is just beginning to work."

At this point, shouts of pleasure were heard from the audience. Lalita, the dancing-girl, had sung her prelude and launched forth into movement. She was posing as Sri Krishna, the divine cowherd, her feet crossed at the ankles and her arms raised in the attitude of one playing the flute. The easy grace of her movements had charmed the lovers of beauty, while the religious theme had enslaved the devouter portion of the audience.

"She is in splendid form to-day," remarked Gopinath with pleasure.

The guests knew they would see some really good dancing and had come determined to enjoy themselves. At first it had been nothing more than a simple physical relish for the beautiful woman who had agreed to dance for their delectation, but very soon they found that the appeal of her art was as powerful as the charm of her

person. She was in a class by herself, as far removed from the commoner beauties of her class as her art was removed from the stale, flat and formal exhibitions which frequently passed for dancing. Lalita was nothing if not original. Her very dress, carefully thought-out to the last detail, betokened her originality. She wore *pyjamas* of real silk, carefully selected to match her wonderful gleaming *sari;* they set off the lines of her slim figure in pleasing contrast to the typical, stocky, nautch-girl, swaddled to suffocation at neck, bosom and leg. How different Lalita—an artist in revelation! A few inches of gleaming throat, and the larger part of the upper arm were discreetly exposed, while tantalising stretches of soft skin were left bare on both sides below her bosom.

At the conclusion of her first dance shouts of '*shabash*' and '*wah-wa*' filled the air. The Zamindar of Nanda Devi, a discerning if somewhat impulsive patron of the arts, snatched the diamond ring from his fingers and pressed it on her: Gopinath presented her on the spot with a beautiful Benares *sari.* Old Chudamani Anantarama Aiyar's face was a mask of delighted pleasure. Addressing those in front of him, he said,

"It is not Gunavati's daughter whom we see before us. It is not merely music or dancing. It is *Nadabrahman* itself, creative sounds wedded to form. God bless her and bring prosperity to her."

Raghunath turned round and looked at Anantakrishnan as much as to say, "Your father has spoken. What do you say now?"

The turmoil of congratulation over, Raghunath

suggested that Lalita should be asked to sing to them privately the next evening and Sakaram, coming suddenly forward, seconded the proposal with warmth. Usually, he sat silent and moody; now he was in a blaze of excitement. His face was beaming with pleasure; for once, it had shed its lost-dog look. Lalita replied demurely that she would gladly sing anytime the Athawars wished.

"On one condition," she said, with a shy smile.

"Yes?" said Gopinath, a shade anxiously.

Raghunath and the rest stared. Condition? What was the little minx going to demand?

"On condition that Sakaram Raoji plays on the *vina*."

There was a shade of delightful shyness in her face as she said it. Raghunath expected that Sakaram would decline with blushes and confusion and was on the point of asking him not to be silly. To his surprise, Sakaram replied, loudly, and without the slightest hesitation, "With pleasure".

Raghunath was staggered. What had come over Sakaram? Under what magic spell had he fallen? He looked meaningly at Anantakrishna Aiyar. Anantakrishna said, slowly, looking from Raghunath to Sakaram and back,

"Have a care, man. He is too attractive to be allowed to make music with her."

CHAPTER IV.

For five days the Athawar household remained in indescribable bustle. On the first day, in an auspicious hour, before witness-bearing *Agni,* the Fire-God, Moreshwar Jeswant Rao had tied the *tali* round the neck of Gopinath's pretty, dark-eyed daughter, Uma. On the subsequent days, until the final invocation of blessings by the assembled Brahmin priests of Kedaram, Jeswant Rao was supposed to live the life of a Vedic householder. Morning and evening he religiously performed the *aupasana,* the daily worship before the sacrificial fire. But although in theory a sacrament, the occasion was really one of general jollification. Round the religious ritual was built an elaborate social routine for the entertainment of the household and its guests. There was music every evening, when lady guests were coaxed out of their shyness into singing songs about love, the season of spring and the joy of living. There was feasting on a large scale, to which every one in the town considered himself bidden. And jokes, time-honoured and salacious, were bandied about, mostly at the expense of the bride and bridegroom who were considered fair game for every wag in the house.

At the *aupasana,* always conducted in some state, the older members of the family made a point of being present. Raghunath watched Jeswant go through the ritual with amused interest. He knew that Jeswant, like most of young India, had not the slightest notion of what it all meant.

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"Be careful, Jeswant Rao, to repeat the *mantras* correctly."

"He won't even try, Raghunath Rao," said Ananda Rao, a shade of disappointment in his voice. "He just mumbles and that is all. It is all very annoying." Ananda Rao belonged to the old school and liked his son to take his religious duties seriously.

Jeswant proceeded with the *aupasana,* but a call came for Raghunath. The Athawars were giving a feast the next day and they were considering details. Gopinath and his wife, with Aunt Tholasi and Vaman Janardhan were in conference. Gopinath was for no restriction whatsoever and a free house for all comers. Vaman, needless to say, was resolute in opposition to the idea. "Our house has been a *choultry* all these years. It is time we stopped all that. Yesterday, the crowd was unmanageable. The feeding began at eleven and when the last leaves were removed it was past three and the cooks were actually taking tiffin to the Moreshwars."

Gopinath was pained by Vaman's attitude. "We can't make any difference now, Vaman. The Athawars have always kept open house and what will people say if we refuse them admission to a marriage feast? At most the uninvited will not exceed forty or fifty."

"Forty or fifty! Not less than a hundred and fifty, I insist. Even forty or fifty is no joke. At that rate for every meal, during the next two days, why, we shall have the whole town dining with us."

"It is only once in a way, *dada,*" said Raghunath, addressing Gopinath, "and we won't be ruined by that."

Raghunath did not hit it off with Vaman and rarely addressed his observations to him.

Anantakrishna came along, idly chewing a piece of areca-nut. Taking Raghunath's arm, he led him upstairs to his room. When the family moved to Athawar House, Raghunath, with unerring instinct, had selected a snug corner for himself, where he kept his books and papers. The room had a southern exposure and a verandah running in front where Raghunath slept at night. At one end stood a well-lined book-case, a rosewood table littered with writing materials, newspaper-cuttings and the pamphlets of the Theosophical Society. At the other end, there was a broad, low bench, covered with a thick, patterned cloth, the manufacture of the local jail. On the wall hung pictures of Mrs. Besant and Colonel Olcott, while over the door-frame rested a silver Lakshmi which Raghunath's wife, Santa Bai, had brought from Mysore. An enlargement in bromide of Raghunath's little daughter, Sona, looked on with an impish smile from the northern wall. The rattan easy-chair on which Anantakrishna Aiyar stretched himself was an heirloom and was said to be the identical chair on which grandfather Ugrasena had sat when he was counsellor to the Maharajah Sivaji.

Raghunath sat down on the bench and began to rail at Vaman's ill-timed parsimony, but his friend was quick in justification of the maligned brother.

"Vaman is no fool, Raghunath. He has a rough coat and he bristles up like a porcupine. But he is sound in essentials. He is right in objecting to all this waste."

"We have no right to talk about waste. Charity, as expressed in free feeding, is the family inheritance. *Noblesse oblige.*"

"Even though you have to mortgage your lands to do it, I suppose!"

There was a patter of feet on the verandah. Raghunath's face lit up as it always did when his little daughter hove in sight.

Anantakrishna Aiyar's son, Venkatramani, a gay, good-looking lad of about thirteen, came in leading Sona by the hand. He was in khaki shorts, their pockets stuffed with a scout knife, odd pieces of string and the miscellaneous articles that boys love. Sona, still holding Venkatramani by the hand, lisped in Marathi, like one repeating a part,

"Uncle Sakaram is playing the *vina*. Uncle Gopinath says, 'Come'."

The ladies had come in by now and their faces beamed with pleasure when the child conveyed Gopinath's invitation. Raghunath, petting his daughter, asked her if *Kaka* Anantakrishna might come too. Sona edged away and hid her face behind Venkatramani shyly. Anantakrishna's wife, a pleasant-looking, motherly woman, explained. "Gopinath Punt asked Venkatramani to fetch you both for the music party downstairs. Venkatramani started to go but Sona, who has been playing with him all the evening, offered to go and call you. She would not let Venkatramani go out of her sight."

"Oh! You were playing with Venkatramani, were you? What were you playing, Sona?" asked her father.

"*Koo-ball,*" said Sona, recovering from her shyness.

"Oh! football, was it!" said Raghunath, stroking her hair. "Go and call *Kaka* Anantakrishna, there is a good girl."

Sona lapsed into shyness again. Venkatramani encouraged her, saying, "Say 'Come, *kaka*'. Else, I won't play football with you."

"Come, *kaka,*" said the child dutifully and again hid her face behind Venkatramani. Raghunath thought idly, "What friends they are! What a pity they couldn't marry!" But Sona was a Mahratta girl and Venkatramani, a Tamil boy and the idea of such a union would have wronged all the conventions.

They went downstairs and saw the whole family gathered in the hall to hear Lalita sing and Sakaram play on his *vina*. A drum and a violin formed the accompaniments, but the leading roles were Lalita's and Sakaram's. Lalita led off in the orthodox style with an invocation to Ganesa, the remover of obstacles. She then sang a number of airs, taking care to elaborate the particular tune beforehand. The dignified sweep of *Kalyani,* intended for the evening hour, the languid grace of *Sahana,* the alert march of *Bilahari,* with which man greets the morning, were all rendered with masterly effect. Sakaram's playing on the *vina* blended deliciously with Lalita's singing. Towards the end, Lalita sang the famous composition of Tyagaraja, in which the Lord Vishnu is apostrophised as reclining on the ocean of milk, and as her voice rose in the final crescendo, the assembly swayed with delight and raised their hands as if they joined in the chorus in imagination.

The music came to an end, but Sakaram had not come back to earth. A new and undreamt-of happiness seemed to have come over him. His face shone; he was eager, voluble. Raghunath was pleased with the change and Gopinath patted him affectionately on the back. But Vaman Janardhan, who had come in towards the end, looked on with a savage scowl, and as the guests dispersed, darted out of the room. "This finishes it!" he thought. "A dancing-girl and an Athawar joining in music! This was the only thing wanting and it has been supplied. God help the Athawars!"

CHAPTER V.

When, at the expiry of his leave, Anantakrishna Aiyar was preparing to rejoin his division, he received a communication from Government posting him to Kavutapur, an unfavoured district in the north of the Presidency. The transfer could not have come at a more inopportune moment. His wife was expecting her fourth child and Kavutapur was about the last place to which any man in his senses would take a wife in that condition. Again, Anantakrishna's mother was old and infirm and naturally wished that her son should be as near her as possible. Srivallangi, his present station, was but a few hours' journey by car from Kedaram and Anantakrishna could be called to her bedside at any moment. Anantakrishna had travelled far from the ways of his forefathers, but he was too good a son to contemplate with equanimity the idea of burdening his dying mother with a feeling of having to quit this world inadequately fortified to meet her Maker.

His father, again, had to be considered. Chudamani Anantarama Aiyar had been a public servant himself and had in his day been knocked about from place to place. But now, he had come to anchor at Kedaram, where all his interests lay. He was a definitely religious man and had achieved a more than ordinary detachment from the daily concerns of family life. Anantakrishna would have liked to keep his father with him wherever his official duties took him, for he was a

tower of silent strength and a reassuring presence, but at the same time he realised that it would be wholly unfair to drag the old man from one end of the province to the other.

But the chief reason why Anantakrishna Aiyar wished to stay on at Srivallangi was to supervise the education of his son, Venkatramani, who would have to go up for his S.S.L.C. Examination in the course of the next year or two. Anantakrishna had no opinion of the education imparted at schools or the educational methods employed. Going away to Kavutapur meant either that his son must manage practically without his guidance or must follow him to Gandindi, the Kavutapur headquarters, where luckily, they had a good High School. But this, in turn, meant that the boy would have to part from his grandfather. It was all most upsetting, but Anantakrishna felt that there was no way out and decided to accept the position cheerfully.

Raghunath importuned him to apply for a cancellation of the order transferring him, but Anantakrishna would not hear of it, though his father's eyes lit up when Raghunath made the suggestion.

"It would never do, Raghunath. I have never asked for a favour before."

"All the more reason why you may ask now."

"Just the contrary. I do not wish to make a change."

"If you are so squeamish about it, do not ask for any place in particular, but just write and explain your difficulties and ask to be kept somewhere near Kedaram. Go up to Ooty and discuss the matter with the Government."

"Government does not debate, it merely orders." Anantakrishna was an official all over.

Raghunath saw there was reason in what Anantakrishna said. He drummed idly with his fingers on the table. "What sort of a place exactly is Kavutapur?"

"A dismal malarial swamp. It breeds pests and politicians."

"Well, that is satisfactory. You may catch the politicians and the pests may catch you. A sort of Irish retaliation. And serve you right, too."

"That's quite possible. We may do each other good. But the politics of Kavutapur, I understand, are about the most hateful in the Presidency."

"I am glad to hear that. It almost reconciles me to your transfer. I hope they will knock all the nonsense out of your head."

Raghunath was alternately amused and enraged by what he considered Anantakrishna's pathetic faith in a Government he himself regarded as mostly a self-seeking menace to the rising nationalism of the country. He made little impression on his friend—a hard-headed man, wedded to his work, which all agreed he did capably and well. The Standing Orders of the Board of Revenue were Anantakrishna's Bible and the Civil List his hagiology of gods. It was sometimes said by malicious-minded people who were slack in their work and suffered in consequence, that his attitude towards his officers was that of a devotee, but if Anantakrishna respected his officers, they returned the compliment in ample measure. Anantakrishna knew his job and was dependable. He came of a good stock, was already a Rao Sahib, could write a tolerable report

without losing himself in words and, what was more, could play an excellent game of tennis. His manly and independent bearing, doubtless, had its own share in influencing regard, and in turn, Anantakrishna Aiyar was full of admiration for his officers. It may be that, as he used to say, he was very lucky in them. On the whole he thought that the British Indian public service was the best of all the services in the world and that everything was well with it.

He said now, looking speculatively at his father, "I have no use for politics or politicians and only wish to be left alone. Raghunath would like to abolish us and hand us over to the *talkingwalas*."

The old man smiled. "There is a good deal to be said for Raghunath's point of view, Anantakrishna. Had it not been for the agitation which the Congress has carried on, do you think you would have had the reforms?"

"I am certain we would have had. Hadn't we the Morley-Minto Reforms in 1908 and instalments of reform prior to that? Congress or no Congress, reforms would have come."

"That is what I call kicking the ladder by which one rose."

Anantakrishna abandoned the attempt to convince one already converted. Anxious to switch back the discussion to something less controversial, he said, "In any case, Raghunath, I stand to gain by the Reforms. Unless things seriously miscarry or I make an utter fool of myself, I shall be one of the first Collectors under them. Who knows, man, I may even be Chief Secretary or a member of Council!"

"And sell the remnants of your soul to your British masters!"

"Say, sale of bodies, and I agree. The British have no use for our souls."

"Quite so. Or anybody's for that matter. They haven't any themselves."

"How dogmatic you are! You have not been within six feet of an Englishman and yet you would profess to know all about their souls."

"Quite true. I wish I could put them all six thousand miles over the sea."

"Wait till you get complete Swaraj, then. Joking apart,"—he preferred to treat the discussion as a joke, to avoid further acerbity—"the new Government of India Act makes a great step in advance. Take yourself. You ought to stand for the Legislative Council, if Vaman will let you."

But when the fit of anti-Britishness was on Raghunath it was not easy to bring him back to normal. He said with decision. "Eyewash, man—all eyewash."

Gopinath Punt's voice was now heard on the outer verandah. He came in swinging a cane, his jolly face alert with exercise. "What is this, I hear, Anantakrishna, about your being transferred? I returned from Syamalapuri only last night and Raghunath was in a terrible way over it. Can't you get the order altered?"

"I am afraid I cannot, *dada* Gopinath. Government don't like that sort of thing. Raghunath is very angry and wants that the mosquitoes of Kavutapur should dine on me."

Anantakrishna explained his point of view and

Gopinath, who was one of the easiest persons to convince, agreed that it did not matter where one was posted so long as he did his duty and trusted to God. With true philosophy, he said, "Everything happens for the best. Speaking selfishly, I am even inclined to be glad for one reason. Poor Susila will have somebody to go to if that horrid mother-in-law of hers continues to plague her. At any rate, we can hear from you what is happening."

Anantakrishna slapped his thigh. "I never thought of that! Is she in Gandindi?"

"Right in the middle of it," said Raghunath, "Amidst its gutters and sewers. I do not think she ever gets a breath of fresh air."

"What sort of a man is her husband?"

"At best a fool and at worst a blackguard and always under mummy's influence."

Gopinath did not approve of this downright condemnation of misguided people. "Well, he is not such a bad fellow either. It is only greed. They are after Susila's mother's jewels, I think, and are always worrying her to get them to Gandindi."

"That is not all," said Raghunath impatiently. "They work her like a gang cooly. They taunt her for being an Athawar, and say she is uppish and all the rest of it. Brutes!"

Sadness settled upon them all.

Gopinath said, "Have an eye on her, Anantakrishna. You are as a brother to her. Speak to your wife too. Are you taking her with you?"

"I am, for a few months. I think I shall send her back in October."

Anantakrishna's wife came in with water from the well, and smiled a welcome to the Athawar brothers. Anantakrishna told her, "Gopinath has been talking to me about Susila. Couldn't we help there?"

She stood with her brass pitcher held against her hip. "Of course, we can. Aunt Tholasi met me at the Kedareswar temple last night and asked me to look after her. She could not talk, poor Tholasi Bai, she was choking. Where is the need to tell us, wŏn't we look after the dear child? I think, on the whole, it is good that we are going to Gandindi. We are in God's hands and He is everywhere."

"That is the voice of the Goddess Lakshmi speaking. Did I not tell you, it is all for the best?" said Gopinath, greatly pleased. And Raghunath thought, "Optimist! optimist! Yet perhaps he may be right."

CHAPTER VI.

Anantakrishna departed in due course for the horrors of Gandindi and for a time day succeeded day uneventfully. At Kedaram, life moved in its accustomed grooves. So far at least, the move to Kedaram had done the Athawars no apparent harm; even Vaman seemed to be quite at home in the new house. At home, yes; but entirely lacking in initiative. Worse; an arm-chair critic who got in everybody's way. His daughter Ambu's health was causing general anxiety and he would do nothing in the matter. Nor would he give Gopinath a free hand; not that Gopinath would have shirked his duty on that account, but he preferred to pick his way warily where Vaman was concerned. Saku was increasingly sulky but Vaman did not seem to mind; Raghunath was in a chronic state of repressed indignation; he hated what he thought was a mere pose on Vaman's part. He had diagnosed his apparent indifference as a sort of inverted vanity which made him assume the role of one who put the family as a whole before his own children. There was something in that; he was subject, for all his misanthropy, to fits of paternal love which expressed itself in obstreperous petting of his children in odd corners of the house when nobody was by. Gopinath, with a truer perception of the position, put it down to shyness on Vaman's part. But all this did not relieve the strain; there seemed to be no limit to the extent to which Vaman could vex and annoy.

But the matter of Ambu could not be put off any longer. Kamath, the Assistant Surgeon in the local Government hospital, advised the child being taken to Madras and placed under a specialist. Gopinath and Raghunath strongly urged its being done, but Vaman replied with a doubtful air that if she was destined to recover she ought to be able to do so at Kedaram.

Brihaspati Venkatappa had fixed a six-months period for the commencement of her recovery, and Vaman, for all his professed distrust of the astrologer, was pinning his faith to the hopeful prophecy. His wife, Saku Bai, trusted rather in the physician Kailasa Asari, a Tamil doctor with considerable experience of children's ailments, who had confidently asserted that marriage was the most certain cure for her malady. Saku's neighbour, Sadasiva Rao's mother, who was so old that she had lost count of time, endorsed Kailasa Asari's opinion and cited instances within her memory where similar affections had been cured by marriage; the trouble was the work of a malignant spirit which only the marriage of the sufferer could exorcise. Now, the opinion and experience of Sadasiva Rao's mother was as good authority as a text from Manu, and ever since Uma's marriage in May, Saku had been making a grievance of Ambu's unwedded condition. Ambu was a half-wit, for whom nobody would care, not even her father. Why did God make her bear such an unfortunate child? Was it her own *karma* or was it her daughter's?

Meanwhile, Kamath was growing more and more insistent and began to tax Gopinath with indifference.

"You should see to it, Gopinath Punt, as the head of the family."

Gopinath shook his head helplessly. "I am prepared to do everything in my power, doctor. But my brother, Vaman,—"

The doctor made a gesture of impatience. "Your brother is an . . . . . . " He checked himself, but added in a tone of disgust, "Look here, Gopinath Punt, don't say that I did not warn you in time. Her condition is very bad and, a month or two more, it may be too late. An operation may be necessary and the sooner you have it done, the better."

The Athawars had had their dinner and Gopinath was resting on the swing in the hall, chewing betel. His wife stood at his side making up the *pan* for him. Sakaram was playing on the *vina,* sitting on a bench opposite. He was playing *Sriraga,* the air for the afternoon hour, of which Gopinath was particularly fond. It fitted in with his mood after the noon-day meal when he felt at peace with all the world.

At dinner that day, he had spoken to Vaman strongly about Ambu's case and offered to forego certain accustomed conveniences to find the money for her treatment if Vaman thought that the expense would be an extravagance. For once, Vaman seemed to be really considering the proposal. Now, just at this phychological moment, Raghunath came in bearing a letter which the postman had handed to him. It was from Anantakrishna at Kavutapur and brought disquieting news about Susila. Susila was in the family way, and Anantakrishna said that she was extremely weak. He wrote: "The poor child hasn't a moment's

rest. My wife brought her to stay with us for a day but before the evening was over her husband came and fetched her away. She was wanted at home urgently as somebody or other was ill. As if Susila was in the best of health! Her mother-in-law is a perfect horror. I did not expect to find an angel but the reality is something even I had not bargained for. I called in Sastri, the local doctor, and he says Susila must not be kept here a day longer. He says hers is going to be a difficult case and she must be treated for it even from now. He advises complete rest and this is just what she is not likely to get here. Yadav Rao, the husband—he is an M.A. isn't he?—is pestering her for her mother's jewels and though Susila won't tell, I am afraid he beats her. In any case she looks like a hunted animal. *Our* interest in her seems to be her latest offence. I think, our presence is a steadying influence but it is not very far that we can go. I am convinced that the only thing to do is for one of you to come here and take her away until she is confined. Explain the position to Gopinath and arrange to have Susila taken home at once.

"Venkatramani is getting on famously, thank you. His latest craze is cricket and he is said to be a rather dashing, though very unorthodox, bat. Thanks to Mr. Branksome, our Collector, cricket is all the go in the local High School at the present moment, but I do not know how long it is going to last. There are too many pestilential politicians about, begging your pardon for putting it in such a downright way. So far, the school has not been touched, but with all this *Satyagraha* stunt, it is not possible to vouch for the

future. I am enclosing a letter from Susila to Aunt Tholasi. Please hand it to her."

Raghunath read out Susila's letter which was in Marathi, and Aunt Tholasi was visibly moved.

"Poor child," she stammered, "my brother married her mother in an evil hour." She was about to say something of the curse but remembered in time the presence of Sakaram and changed her intention. "She was a sweet woman and would never raise her voice above a whisper. She looked after your father devotedly, but she was not a lucky woman and died before her time. Your father was inconsolable and died of a broken heart."

This last was an overstatement, as old Goswami Punt had lived—and by no means unconsoled—for more than ten years after his second wife's death. But it was at least a fact he had grieved for her loss, and been sufficiently faithful to her memory not to think of marrying again.

"What shall we do, *athya?*" asked Gopinath, picking his teeth with a toothpick.

"There is only one thing to do and that is to send for her directly. Let Raghunath go to Kavutapur and fetch her."

Raghunath stirred uneasily. "But will that harridan agree to send Susila?"

The harridan in question was Susila's mother-in-law of whom the Athawars stood in that mortal dread, the cultured feel always for the raw, the gentle for the fierce.

"No fear," said Gopinath, "she will jump at it. She may appear to hesitate a bit saying she can't bear to

be separated from her darling daughter-in-law, but she'll pack her off to Kedaram all the same. What's more, madam Girija Bai will follow to keep her company here before the month is out."

Through their sadness the Athawars smiled. Girija Bai at home was different from Girija Bai as an honoured guest of the Athawars. At Athawar House, she was amiability itself; at home, she ordered Susila about as a slave and lost no opportunity of taunting her. "Oh! Isn't she an Athawar! Comes of a family of *Sirkeles!* It was poor Yadav's *karma* that has hung this millstone round his neck. Delicate? All humbug! A device to loll about in idleness! What use have poor folk for delicacy?"

Vaman Janardhan appeared suddenly at the doorway. He was chewing betel, an unwonted luxury with him, and seemed to be in an unusually amiable mood. His lowering features were relaxed and there was a faint shadow of a smile about his lips; he was even affable to Raghunath. The Athawars were pleased, though not surprised, as Vaman was known to lapse into agreeableness once in a way. On those occasions, Saku, as if to restore the balance, was more than ordinarily vinegarish, for the repressed male in Vaman asserted itself by unseasonable and bearish attempts to make love. Horse laughs, bad jokes and animated pursuit of his wife into the kitchen and the store-room were the stuff of his elemental love-making. He was in one of those rare moods to-day, and the Athawars decided to make the most of it.

"Do you see this, Vaman?" asked Gopinath, handing him Anantakrishna's letter.

"Read it, Raghunath," said Vaman graciously.

Vaman had a slight acquaintance with the English language but not enough to carry him over long letters. When Raghunath had finished reading, Vaman thought for a minute and said, "But where is the hurry, *dada?* Susila's confinement will not be till February next. Won't it be enough if we brought her down in January?"

"She may not be in existence then and there will not be any need to worry about bringing her," said Raghunath impulsively.

Sakaram threw a grateful look at him. But Aunt Tholasi pulled him up.

"Don't talk like that, Raghunath. It is so ominous. You misunderstand Vaman's meaning. He is not against our bringing Susila home. He is only asking if there is any immediate urgency."

Vaman answered without heat. "I have no objection to Susila coming here at once. I was thinking of Girija Bai. I do not wish to have her on our hands sooner than we can help."

With this sentiment at least they all agreed. Coming from Vaman it had all the importance of a major joke and it was enjoyed as such. If ever there was an unwelcome guest at Athawar House, it was Girija Bai. She endeavoured to please, no doubt, and in the attempt tortured her face into what was meant for smiles and she professed hourly her concern for Susila's health. But, discord-making was her special talent and before she had been a few weeks in the house she succeeded in setting the inmates by the ears. During her last visit she had almost made Saku Bai and Raghunath's

wife, Santa Bai, enemies for life. Yet, for Susila's sake, the Athawars were obliged to overlook all her disadvantages and take her at face value.

Aunt Tholasi, wishing to strike while the iron was hot, said, "I wish to make a suggestion, Gopinath. Vaman, do not go away, please. I think it would be a good plan for us to take a small house at Madras and take Ambu there for treatment. Please don't interrupt, Vaman. Vaman and Saku will of course have to be there. And if Vaman does not mind, I shall accompany them. I have long wanted to visit some of the sacred places round about Madras. Tiruttani and Tiruvottiyur, for instance. If Raghunath would go and fetch Susila to Madras, we could all live there for a few months and, God willing, everything may turn out well. Santa's sister said that there was a friend of hers who is a doctor, and she could look after Susila. Personally I do not like men to look after women-patients, if it can be helped."

"It is a splendid idea, *athya,*" said Gopinath almost with gusto. Vaman did not think so. He did not hold with women doctors, especially when they happened to be Brahmins. And the expense! But Aunt Tholasi who guessed what was passing in his mind was equal to the occasion.

She said, "Don't mind the additional expense, Vaman. The rent will be the only extra and I shall pay it and probably the medical expenses as well. And, do you not owe it to me, Vaman, that you should take me to places of pilgrimage in my old age?"

"Agreed, *athya,*" said Vaman, without further argument. "Your will is law to us."

"There is one distinct advantage in this proposal," remarked Gopinath. "We shall keep the Girija woman away."

But Vaman shook his head gloomily. "I am not sure of that. She will run us to earth wherever we may happen to be."

There was truth in that statement.

CHAPTER VII.

The proposal for a move to Madras delighted at least one member of the Athawar family—Saku Bai. It was true that she had given her faith to Kailasa Asari and Sadasiva Rao's mother and had been regularly agitating for Ambu's marriage ever since Uma's wedding in May. But the prospect of a journey to Madras and a prolonged stay there had its own attractions and, for the moment, it overbore her distrust of English medicine. As she used to say herself, she was a regular stick-in-the-mud, had nowhere to go, and was confined to Kedaram, except when she went to Syamalapuri during the harvest or for the festival to Syamaladevi in June. She had an only brother who was something in the railway in Central India, and he came down south, once in three or four years, to pay a brief visit to his sister at Athawar House. But he had a huge family of his own and lived so far away that it was out of the question for Saku to return the visit.

Vaman Janardhan went with his wife and daughter to Madras, Aunt Tholasi also accompanying. They established themselves in a small house in Triplicane which was near enough both to the doctor's and to the Marina, where the family could go, of an evening, to take the air. Vaman, with instinctive parsimony, had looked up a hovel in crowded Chintadripet but Raghunath for once had his way and was able to persuade Vaman to fix himself up at Triplicane. Ambu was

placed under the observation of Doctor Reddi, who thought that an operation might have to be performed some time later.

In due course, Susila arrived from Kavutapur, where Raghunath had been to fetch her. Miss Kamala Ratna, a lady-doctor friend of Santa's sister Menaka, was put in charge of Susila. Vaman hated these modern women with their English speech and what he termed their smirking ways but though at Kedaram he might have attempted a fuss, in Madras he felt himself strangely suppressed.

In December there was a family reunion at Triplicane. Raghunath had come with his wife and Sona for the Theosophical Convention. He spent the greater part of every day at Adyar. He belonged to the Esoteric circle of the Theosophists and busied himself in connection with the annual house-warming at Adyar. He took Sona out to all the show-places of Madras and was happy at the delight which she manifested at seeing the animals in the Zoo and the fishes in the Aquarium. Sona was a most fascinating child, with her dark eyes and wavy ringlets, and everybody at Adyar instantly took to her. Mrs. Besant was very busy fighting against the non-Co-operation which Mr. Gandhi was launching upon an agitated country. Yet she found time to fondle Sona, who was immensely attracted to the grey-haired old lady.

"Don't keep her shut up indoors, Raghunath Rao. Give her the best education that you can. You mustn't let Menaka beat her after all. The India of the future is going to be made by the women of this country, take my word for it."

And Raghunath promised that he would spare nothing in the way of Sona's education.

"And, mind you, don't get her married before she is sixteen or seventeen."

"But my people, madam," began Raghunath.

"I know what your people will say. You should not give in. You will have to talk them round."

"That's easier said than done. I shall do my best, however. I do not want her to marry, in any case, till she is fourteen."

"That's something to begin with. Stick out for seventeen; then it is probable you may compromise on fourteen."

Mrs. Besant, drawing Sona to her and stroking her hair, asked her if she would not like to be a scholar like her Aunt Menaka. The little child smiled shyly and edged towards her father and mumbled "Yes".

Raghunath laid the well-meant advice to heart, rejoicing that the old lady of his veneration had found time to notice his child.

Gopinath Punt and his wife arrived during Christmas, as this was the best time for them to pay their long-desired visit to Madras. Gopinath was a stay-at-home and did not care to leave Kedaram. He would have been lost in a long-distance journey and was acutely uncomfortable in other people's houses. But Sumitra was set on going and good-natured Gopinath had given in. They had asked Sakaram to accompany them, but he had excused himself against his own better judgment; Gopinath did not know what was passing in his brother's mind; Sakaram was longing to have the house all to himself for a time so that

he could be alone with Lalita, the nautch-girl, though he dared not confess as much even to himself. So Gopinath left him behind, intending to stay in Madras for a fortnight; but he tarried there while week ran into week, not returning to Kedaram even for *Sankranthi*.

When Raghunath and his wife returned from Adyar at the end of the Convention week, they found that a less welcome guest had joined the company at Triplicane—to wit, Girija Bai. The Athawars had been congratulating themselves that, though they had been in Madras for more than two months, Susila's mother-in-law had made no appearance, and they had begun to hope that the unexpected would happen and she might not come at all. It was, however, business and not choice which had stood in the way of Girija Bai's coming. She had arranged to leave Gandindi early in November, but an urgent summons came from her sister near Madura. So to Madura she went and what with one thing and another, her departure thence had been delayed and, when at the end of the month she was free to leave, she stopped at Kedaram on her way up and put in a week at Athawar House. There her nose for trouble found keen incentive to tarry. There was nobody at home except Sakaram and Vaman's two elder boys; there was no woman in the house, the cooking being done by a *pothi* from South Canara. As Girija Bai said, the house wore a deserted appearance but, in spite of it, she hung on for a week looking about her and taking comprehensive notes about Sakaram. Sakaram, released from the watchful scrutiny of the family, was spending all

his spare time with Lalita. Girija Bai's visit did not deter him; in fact, he never gave a thought to her; except for an occasional courteous inquiry, he left her severely alone. The inquisitive woman pricked up her ears, strained her eyes and took in all that was happening and a good deal that wasn't. At the end of a week she left for Madras, arriving there on New Year's Day. She was the first stranger to cross the Athawars' household that morning and when Raghunath came to know of this he was worried in mind. He had been at Adyar and had not seen her himself but, despite his vaunted freedom from superstitious notions, he was displeased to learn that the first person the Athawars had set eyes on that morning was this horrid woman from Kavutapur. Gopinath was untroubled. He had even a consolatory reflection ready. "After all, *our* year begins only in April. The first of January is not an important day with us." That was true; but for all practical purposes, the New Year began with January and Raghunath did not like it at all.

The Athawars hoped that, seeing that they were cramped for space, Girija Bai would take herself away at an early date. But Girija Bai had as much delicacy of feeling as a hippopotamus. As Vaman observed: "What is good for the Athawars is good enough for her, and she knows it. She'll never leave—never!"

Girija Bai was an industrious sight-seer and invited herself to all the Athawar parties, to the temples and sacred tanks. Vaman grumbled at the expense in secret—for the Girija woman would not pay for her transit and she occupied as much space as any two

ordinary women. Not that Gopinath would have allowed her to pay her train or tram fare—that was not the Athawar way—but all felt that she might well have shown some glimmerings of decency by at least offering to pay. Girija, however, taking it for granted that the Athawars should meet all the expense, made herself exceedingly agreeable to the women and especially to Tholasi Bai.

Shortly after the New Year the Athawars had another visitor, again not too welcome. This time it was Kamakshi Bai, wife of Sakaram. This they regarded as in the nature of a condescension, for the lady rarely ever visited at Athawar House and when she did, it was only for the briefest possible stay. She was a short, stoutish woman, dark-skinned and of an unattractive appearance. Her father was a Judge, and she thought no end of herself on that account. Her arrival at Athawar House was always in state, her departure from it invariably tempestuous. During her whirlwind visits, she managed to make herself cordially disliked by her general air of offensive arrogance and by her querulous complaints about the way in which she was treated and about the indifference of what she prettily called her nincompoop of a husband. People often wondered what irony of fate it was that had joined the handsome, gentle-mannered Sakaram to this unprepossessing virago. Gopinath Punt had looked on the proposal at the time with favour as he thought that the Judge might help Sakaram to a place in the public service, for Gopinath had an unsatisfied longing that the Athawars should take their proper place in the public service of the country and restore the official

glories of their house; Raghunath had proved a broken reed and Sakaram was now their only hope. Sakaram did not care for Kamakshi Bai at all, but had given in out of deference to Gopinath and his aunt Tholasi Bai. Little had any of them guessed what they were letting themselves in for.

Kamakshi entered the house at Triplicane, like the east wind, biting and bitter. She gave no hints as to what had brought her there so unexpectedly, and to Aunt Tholasi's questions she replied by a moody silence. She, however, made great advances to Girija Bai and was frequently seen in whispered conversation with her. The two were always going out together, much to the disgust and disquiet of the Athawars. In the end, Aunt Tholasi attempted a well-meant warning, whereupon Kamakshi instantly lost her temper.

"I know whom to talk to. Please do not dictate to me."

"Do not talk to me like that, Kamakshi," reproved Aunt Tholasi, mildly. "I do not mean any offence. You are one of us and you should not allow an utter stranger like her to come between us. Girija Bai is a stranger, after all."

"Stranger or no stranger, it comes to the same thing for all the consideration that I get in this family."

Saku Bai, who was bringing a decoction of dried ginger for Ambu who was in bed with a fever, could not help saying: "You think so, do you? Then why did you trouble to come here, Kamakshi Bai? You should have gone to Gandindi."

Kamakshi Bai, who feared Saku in her heart, flew into a rage Retorting vehemently, she said that it

was as much her house as theirs and that, in any case, she had her father's house to go to, which was more than could be said of some people. She was in better case than those pitiful creatures who had no roof to their heads but that which their husbands provided.

Saku Bai had a temper at least as quick as Kamakshi's. She said with masterly sarcasm, "Yes, my father wasn't a Judge, thank Heaven. A Judge, indeed! The Athawars were Dewans and Sirkeles in their time and made judges by the score. People may consider a bit before they preen themselves on being the offspring of a mushroom judge." She then forced the mixture down the throat of unwilling Ambu and went in to see about the cooking.

Aunt Tholasi, pained at the scene which the two women were making, strove to restore peace; but Kamakshi would not hear of it. She burst into tears of rage and, cursing her stupidity in coming where she was not wanted, screamed that she would not stay there a minute longer and rushed into the street before the dumbfounded Athawars knew what was happening.

CHAPTER VIII.

Anantakrishna Aiyar's wife had joined him at the beginning of the hot weather with their newly-born child and, about the same time, Susila returned to Gandindi after her confinement. It had been an anxious time for her and the child that was born—it was a boy—died within the ensuing fortnight. To that child Susila had clung with fond hope as her one solace in the dark days to follow and when the baby died, she was inconsolable. But Susila was endowed with fortitude, rare in a girl of her years, and this, with the sympathy of the Anantakrishna Aiyar's, helped to take the edge off her troubles.

She had at least one unexpected consolation: Girija Bai was away and she had the running of her home all to herself. Yadav Rao, released from his mother's apron-strings, was quite a different proposition from the dutiful son who seemed to possess no soul to call his own when within reach of his mother. Never an ardent lover, he did, however, rise to heights of agreeableness undreamt-of before and a new happiness came upon Susila. In his turn, Yadav Rao often caught himself gazing upon his wife, in a dazed sort of way, wondering what it was that had made his mother turn against her. Susila had introduced him to the Anantakrishna Aiyars and he frequently called at the divisional officer's bungalow with a feeling akin to elation. Yadav Rao was not wanting in worldly wisdom and he knew that the countenance of a divi-

sional officer helped an assistant master with the school management, and especially an assistant master cumbered with a brother-in-law like Chakradara Rao.

This Chakradara Rao was a lawyer with a fairly considerable practice at Gandindi, not in the front rank perhaps, but within measureable distance of it. Latterly, however, he had taken to politics and at the moment was the President of the local committee of the Indian National Congress. Chakradara Rao, for the first time in his life, had attended a session of the Congress and had returned home from Calcutta charged with all the zeal of a novice, and talked of nothing except the Montford Scheme, enlarged councils, proportional representation and such-like matters. The stock of the Congress stood high and Chakradara Rao felt that association with the Congress, far from being a disqualification, might even be a point in his favour. Chakradara Rao had his eye on the Government Pleadership of the district but he felt that he would not be taking any undue risk when he accepted the offer of the local Congress Committee to make him their President.

But his smug self-complacency was destined to receive a rude shock. Mr. Gandhi launched his Non-Co-operation movement on the country and that was the end to Chakradara Rao's peace of mind. All the old cautionary phrases about playing with fire and other elements recurred; yet, to throw up his place on the Committee was unthinkable, for that would brand him as a turncoat and a time-server and such a reputation, once acquired, would be difficult to live down in a place like Gandindi. But Chakradara Rao possessed the

smug philosophy of the eternal waiter upon Providence and, in mingled hope and apprehension, he stuck to his post, endeavouring, whenever possible, to restrain the wilder elements in the Congress camp. But it was soon evident that such a state of affairs could not go on for ever.

Early in the year, Lakshman Doss, the local Secretary and by far the most capable among the local Congress workers, presented Chakradara Rao with a plan of action for the year. It was the most drastic programme that had ever daunted that complacent sitter on the fence. Lakshman Doss, who was a whole-hogger, demanded boycott of councils, schools, colleges, law-courts and foreign cloth. He demanded the introduction of Mr. Gandhi's spinning-wheel into every home.

Seated in his office chair, Chakradara Rao listened with patience and then said, "It is a very ambitious programme, Lakshman Doss. I wish you had suggested something more practicable."

"It is not my programme, Mr. Chakradara Rao. It is the Congress's and Mahatma Gandhi's."

"We weren't consulted," growled Chakradara Rao, tugging at his ferocious-looking moustache. Lakshman Doss opened his eyes in wonder.

"Do you seriously expect . . . "

"No, I do not say that we should be consulted in every particular. But, then you see it is all so drastic."

"It is, and is meant to be. You see, Mr. Chakradara Rao, there can be no half-way house in such matters."

Chakradara felt that he was fast losing caste in the eyes of his relentless Secretary, and so began to temporise.

"I do not wish to act as a wet blanket, Lakshman. Let us concentrate on a few items for the present. Boycott of foreign cloth, for instance. I have practically given up the use of foreign cloth, you know."

"So it is time you took another step forward."

"Quite. Well, let us start this spinning-wheel business. I do not quite see how the *Charka* is going to win this country its freedom. Mahatmaji has given the word, and therefore to question its wisdom, I suppose, would be heresy. Well, I shall try and turn a spinner in my old age. Look out for a good *Charka* for me, Lakshman, and give me a few lessons every day."

The bantering tone hurt Lakshman Doss bitterly, but he pretended not to notice it.

"That will do for the multitude, Mr. Chakradara Rao. But you and I should set a far more shining example. Adopt the *Charka,* by all means, but, at the same time, you must abandon your practice at the Bar."

Chakradara Rao knew this was coming, but for all that he could not prevent a spasm passing through his body when he heard Lakshman Doss making the suggestion to him in cold blood. He steadied himself and said, "A very bright idea, no doubt. But I have my wife and children to consider. There are eleven mouths to feed."

Lakshman Doss leant back in his chair, tired. He took off his white *khaddar* cap and threw it on the table. Practicalities splashed on his eager idealism like

cold water. But, recovering himself once more, he took up the argument.

"In a matter like this, Mr. Chakradara Rao, one must be prepared to make sacrifices."

It was on Chakradara Rao's lips that the suggestion to make sacrifices came glibly to those who had none to make, but he checked himself and said lightly,

"And leave the poor litigant to his fate? That would never do, my dear Lakshman. And please don't imagine that our good friends will give up their practice and retire into obscurity."

A retort formed itself in Doss's mind, but he restrained himself and all the sign that he gave was his lips curling in scorn. But Chakradara Rao never saw what he did not want to see and Doss left him in disgust.

During the next few days Lakshman Doss thought seriously of getting rid of Chakradara Rao altogether, but one or two people to whom he spoke about it shook their heads and told him that Chakradara should not be hustled and that he could be depended upon to play up when the time came to act. Wise in their generation, they knew that Chakradara Rao was no dealer in dramatic gestures and they felt that with him as President they were comfortably safe.

Damning them all mentally for a pack of time-servers, Lakshman Doss decided to force Chakradara's hands. He would call a public meeting at which Chakradara would, as usual, take the chair. It would be a packed house and Chakradara would be obliged to commit himself one way or the other.

The news of Lakshman Doss's visit to Chakradara

Rao and the turn which the conversation took, in due course, reached the ears of Anantakrishna Aiyar. He was amused at the thought of the man's unenviable position and permitted himself an occasional chuckle over it. Anantakrishna was finding himself increasingly at home in Gandindi, a result due in no small measure to the friendliness of Branksome, the Collector. He frequently went to the Collector's bungalow for a game of tennis and spent many an evening discussing everything under the sun with the utmost freedom. Branksome held very definite views as to the right of Indians to run their country and liked to establish very intimate personal contacts with them. He took a good deal of interest in local sport and athletics, and school games had already brightened up considerably in his time.

Anantakrishna's son, Venkatramani, who was extremely good at games and not at all bad at studies, was a favourite of the Branksomes; and one evening, as his father and the Collector sat watching him play a last set of tennis in Branksome's compound, Branksome said,

"Give him all the training that you can, Anantakrishna. That boy will make good."

Mrs. Branksome, a strikingly handsome woman, with a long family connection with the Indian services, agreed with her husband. She was of the type that conscientiously strives to make the husband's work easy by taking a real interest in the Indians with whom contacts arise in the course of official business.

"He talks very well for a boy of his age, Mr. Anantakrishna Aiyar," she said. "In fact, he is

the only boy whose English I can understand. The rest of them speak a sort of pidgin English which defeats me altogether."

"I must thank my old father for it. He has coached him in Sanskrit and English ever since he was a kid that high."

"Made the boy his hobby," mused Branksome, with a half-smile. "How is he at school, Anantakrishna?" he asked interested.

"Middling, I think. He won't take trouble with his lessons. It is all cricket and hockey that he is after."

"Not a bad thing," said Branksome. "It will help in the long run. If you intend to send him home, his games will stand him in greater stead than his studies."

The butler came in with drinks. "Whiskey?" asked Branksome, mischievously. He knew that whiskey wasn't in Anantakrishna's line, but would offer it to him all the same.

"No, please," Mrs. Branksome intervened, and asked the butler to fetch a lime squash for Anantakrishna and another for Venkatramani.

"How would you like being an Assistant Collector, Venkatramani?" she asked as Venkatramani came in, racket in hand.

"I prefer the Police," he replied shyly.

"My brother is a Deputy Superintendent and Venkatramani has stayed a lot with him and so he fancies himself in spurs and a Sam Browne belt," explained Anantakrishna Aiyar, with a smile.

"Try the I.C.S., Venkatramani. You can be trained by your father. That would be jolly, wouldn't it,

Mr. Anantakrishna? You should have a district by then?", said Mrs. Branksome.

"I should have retired by then, Mrs. Branksome, even supposing I get a district some time."

"Then you will have to train him, Walter. He will make a nice *chokra*."

"I shall be glad to have the honour," said Branksome, smiling.

A friendly conversation which had made a great impression on Venkatramani, but which led to one which was less pleasant to remember. For on their way home to his father's official bungalow they had passed Chakradara Rao and Anantakrishna had said without thinking. "Poor old Chakradara, it's a pretty kettle of fish for him. Anyway, he has caught a Tartar in Doss."

Venkatramani bit his lip.

"Doss is a fine fellow. Chakradara Rao is not playing the game."

"What do you know about it?" asked Anantakrishna.

"Chakradara Rao must give up his practice or else resign his Presidentship of the Kavutapur Congress Committee."

Anantakrishna Aiyar was taken aback. "Sits the wind in that quarter?" he said to himself. Turning to Venkatramani, he asked again: "What do you know about such things? Whoever told you that a successful lawyer should give up his practice?"

"The whole school is talking of it, father. They are going to get up a big meeting and they are going to

make old Chakradara Rao do one of two things—give up his practice or, chuck his Presidentship."

"Who told you that?"

"Narayan Doss. He is Lakshman Doss's brother, and is in my form."

Anantakrishna did not like what he heard. He asked, "Do you not get anything better to talk about at school?"

"We talk about these things a good deal, father, and many boys are thinking of giving up school. That is all the go at our school, just at present."

"Oh! indeed! And what is your Headmaster about that he does not put a stop to all this nonsense?"

"What can the Headmaster do? He can't prevent boys from staying away. What power has he to do that?" Venkatramani was getting excited. "He is not a greater man than Mahatma Gandhi."

"Mahatma Gandhi be damned!" burst forth Anantakrishna Aiyar, in quick anger. "You fellows should be flogged and taught not to prate about politics."

Perceiving his error, in gentler tones he told his son: "Gandhi is no doubt a great man but he should leave boys alone. It is for us parents to decide whether our boys should go to school or not. What good, do you think, can come of boys giving up school and cooling their heels at home? Boys should not meddle with politics. Don't you agree, Venkatramani?"

The lad was silent for a minute but, seeing that his father waited for an answer, said roundly, "I don't."

For a minute he was astonished at his own courage in differing from his father so openly, but Anantakrishna, like a wise man, did not pursue the

matter further. With a sad smile, he said, "Foolish boy. Write and ask your grandfather and let us see what he thinks of it," and changed the conversation.

But the incident was an eye-opener to Anantakrishna Aiyar. Here he was at Gandindi charged with the task of maintaining law and order and upholding the authority of Government. And here was incipient sedition in his own house. He wondered within himself, whether he had been right in counselling his Collector to leave things alone and whether Stent, the District Superintendent of Police, who clamoured daily for the strong hand of suppression, was not the wiser man. It was a complicated question and he carried his doubts with him to bed.

CHAPTER IX.

Lakshman Doss' plans for a public meeting came to nothing, mainly owing to the skilful wriggling of his President, Chakradara Rao. Disgusted, he went to Madras in February to meet the leaders of the movement and urged upon them the necessity of sending an orator to Gandindi, with a view to heartening up the workers there. In this his calculations worked out even better than he anticipated. Chandra Kanta De of Bengal was touring in the Deccan and Lakshman Doss succeeded in getting Gandindi included in the itinerary. Chandra Kanta had a fine record of public service, had been a fellow-worker with Gokhale and the stalwarts of an earlier era and, at the moment, was one of Gandhi's most trusted lieutenants. Since the beginning of the Non-Co-operation movement, he had given up a most lucrative post in a Northern Indian University and was going about spreading the new gospel. To have been able to persuade Chandra Kanta De was an unquestionable feather in Lakshman Doss' cap and not all the deprecatory criticisms of the wiseacres in his camp could prevent it fluttering gaily in the sand-storms of Gandindi.

The news of Chandra Kanta's approaching visit was hailed with joy by the people of the district and Lakshman Doss was acclaimed as a man of grit and great ~~mincing~~ power. Even Chakradara Rao felt he dare not make any difficulty about dates and readily offered to accommodate the distinguished visitor in his house. Lakshman Doss bore himself with restraint

and, if he felt any exultation about the success of his plans, he did not show it. The satisfactory fact remained that Chakradara Rao could not go on playing hare and hounds any longer and that he must at last vacate his non-committal seat on the fence.

Chandra Kanta De arrived according to schedule and the whole town turned out to receive him. He was taken in procession to Chakradara Rao's house, the entire route being lined with boys from the local High School. Everybody was pleased at the sight of the gracious old man, grown grey in the service of the country. Even Chakradara Rao felt a curious chastening of the spirit at having been brought into touch with him, and confessed as much to Lakshman Doss. Lakshman Doss listened, but made no reply.

A meeting was advertised to take place the same evening and Chakradara Rao, according to *mamul,* was to preside at it. The Town Hall was crowded to its utmost capacity. Strong contingents had come from the adjoining districts to hear Chandra Kanta and the boys of the local school had mustered in force. Many of them were indeed acting as volunteers to keep order among the crowd, wearing the badge of the Congress.

Venkatramani, in the uniform of a Boy Scout, was stationed near the platform. When he volunteered for duty, his Scoutmaster had given a well-meant hint that he had better keep away, in view of the fact that his father was the Sub-Divisional Officer. Venkatramani was deeply hurt at what he supposed was an affront to his independence. "My father's official position has nothing to do with it, Sir. I am going to act as a volunteer."

But Venkatramani's plans and those of others were interrupted. No sooner had Chandra Kanta De and Chakradara Rao taken their seats than in marched the Town Inspector of Police with a couple of Sub-Inspectors in uniform, and handed to Chandra Kanta an order from the Sub-Magistrate of Gandindi, prohibiting him from addressing any public gathering during his stay in the town. Orders to a similar effect were promptly served upon Chakradara Rao, Lakshman Doss and other members of the Kavutapur Congress Committee. Chandra Kanta read the order and held a brief consultation with Chakradara and Lakshman Doss. The Inspector could see from the frightened look on Chakradara's face and the rage in Doss' that the meeting would be dissolved.

Chandra Kanta De, a handsome old man of over sixty, rose in his chair and, stroking his beard, told the audience that he had been served with an order under Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code, "with which his audience was doubtless familiar" and, from all that he could see, it was a perfectly legal order.

At this the audience stood up with exclamations of indignation. Chandra Kanta put up his hands and told them not to excite themselves, and reminded them that "their great leader, Mahatma Gandhi, begged them to be quite cool and unperturbed" in such circumstances. So far as he was concerned he did not propose to be bound by the order and announced, in clear, ringing tones, that he intended to disobey it there and then. And, before the policemen could collect their wits, he had reeled off in a few concise sentences the message he was taking round the country. "Adopt the creed of

non-co-operation, which is the only means of our national salvation. Eschew the law courts and government-aided schools and boycott foreign cloth for all you are worth. Above all, remember the doctrine of *ahimsa* and decline to have any truck with violence. Go, good men of Gandindi, fight the good fight by peaceful means and help Mother India to come into her own."

The meeting broke up in disorder and the audience poured out excitedly discussing the order of the Magistrate and Chandra Kanta's brief but pointed defiance of it. The Inspector, who was feeling anything but confident, came up to Chandra Kanta and told him, with as severe a look as he could summon: "You have deliberately disobeyed a valid order passed by a competent Magistrate. I am afraid, Sir, you have committed an offence under Section 188 of the Indian Penal Code."

Chandra Kanta smiled a pleasant smile. "I do not know the section you mention, but I am sure I have done something quite unpardonable. If you mean I was acting illegally in disobeying the order, you are perfectly right. I am not running away from Gandindi yet, Inspector. If you want me you will find me at my friend's here," he said, slapping Chakradara Rao on the back.

Chakradara Rao smiled a weak smile. He knew what was coming, and he knew that it was no laughing matter. He was lawyer enough to see the prosecution which was looming ahead and his mind was occupied in cursing Lakshman Doss, for he saw his Government Pleadership slipping relentlessly away.

Within the following hour, a conference of officials met in the District Collector's bungalow. Walter Branksome had returned from his Club in a savage humour, convinced that the Inspector had bungled the job. "Why did he wait till the last moment to serve the order? He should have prevented a crowd from gathering and the order should have been served before De left his quarters." Stent, the District Superintendent of Police, muttered something about the Magistrate taking his own time over the order, while the unfortunate Inspector stood at a distance wearing an injured look. Anantakrishna was there too, having been hurriedly called up by the Collector, and he put in a word for the Inspector. "In any case, I suppose De would have disobeyed the order. He would have gone out and addressed a few people from some street corner, standing on a deal-wood case."

They considered the action to be taken. That Chandra Kanta De should be prosecuted went without saying. Stent insisted that the President and the Secretary should also be run in.

"They are tarred with the same brush, and there is no reason why they should go scot-free."

"My dear fellow," remonstrated Branksome, "they did not speak, and it cannot be said that they disobeyed any order."

"Chakradara was chairman; he should have dissolved the meeting as soon as orders were served. If he wasn't breaking an order himself he was abetting those who did," insisted Stent.

"I do not think we shall be on sure ground there,

Stent. And, in a case like this, I shouldn't risk taking doubtful positions."

"I understand," pursued Stent, "that as soon as De had finished, Lakshman Doss came out to the verandah and held forth on his own about the blazing injustice of 144 orders and other things."

"I think we had better leave him alone, Stent. He cuts little ice."

"But he is the author of all this trouble and he's had a damned long innings."

"I think it would be better to catch them separately," said Anantakrishna. "Chakradara will be only too thankful to climb down. As for Doss, he is only playing to catch the public eye. He is eager for advertisement now and I should not like to give it him."

"I think Anantakrishna is right," said Branksome. "Let us deal with De for the present. What is the procedure now?"

"Sabapathi must make a complaint, as the Magistrate who passed the order," said Anantakrishna.

"I think you will have to try the case, Anantakrishna. It has to be either you or me. I think you had better try the case yourself," said Branksome.

"I have no objection," replied Anantakrishna. Then he told the Inspector: "Tell Sabapathi to hurry up with his complaint. We must try and get the whole business over as quickly as possible."

"Quite so," observed Branksome. "Let us be rid of this case as soon as we can."

Anantakrishna Aiyar came home in time for his supper and asked for his son. He had learnt of the part played by him in the day's proceedings, and did

not like what he had heard. He asked Venkatramani, not unkindly, why he had gone to the meeting. Venkatramani replied:

"The whole school went, father."

"You should not have gone, Venkatramani," said Anantakrishna Aiyar.

"Why not, father?" countered Venkatramani.

It was a difficult question to answer. Anantakrishna Aiyar's reply was evasive.

"Boys should not play with politics."

"We just went to listen to a speech by a great patriot and there is nothing wrong in that."

"But he says all sorts of things against the Government, and it is not fit that young boys should hear all that stuff."

"But the whole school was going, father; how could I stay away? Such a thing isn't done." Venkatramani had a keen sense of schoolboy honour.

Anantakrishna was getting angry. He tried to cut the discussion short by saying:

"You must not argue with me, Venkatramani. I think you have got into that bad habit of late."

Venkatramani hung his head. He thought that his father could not understand a schoolboy's point of view and just took shelter behind his authority.

The meal proceeded heavily, and when milk was served with the last course of rice, Anantakrishna asked his son:

"Do you know what is going to happen to Chandra Kanta De?"

"He is going to be prosecuted," answered Venkatramani, readily.

"How do you know?" said Anantakrishna in surprise. Like many another fond father he underestimated his son's knowledge of what was going on around him.

"The whole town is talking of it."

"And what will happen afterwards?"

"They say he may be sent to jail."

"Right. And that comes of talking lightly of Government. Jail life is not a pleasant thing, Venkatramani."

"How long will they keep him in jail, father?" asked Venkatramani, anxiously.

"I have not made up my mind. I must hear the evidence first."

For once Venkatramani started. "You, father! Are you going to try the case?"

"Yes," replied Anantakrishna, with dignity.

"And you will send him to jail?"

"I am afraid I shall have to," said Anantakrishna, and pursed his lips.

He got up and, washing his hands at the tap, went to the verandah to chew betel.

"What a shame!" cried Venkatramani, his cheeks hot with mounting anger.

Instantly he realised his lapse in manner and, bursting into tears, ran upstairs and lay sobbing in a corner of the verandah.

It was a saddened boy that Mrs. Anantakrishna woke from his deep sleep and half led, half carried to bed in the adjoining room. And Anantakrishna Aiyar sat wondering, realising with a shock that he had spoken to his son as if he were a juvenile offender

being released on probation of good conduct. What should one do with these outbursts? Were they perhaps, after all, no more than the generous enthusiasm of youth?

CHAPTER X.

When Kamakshi Bai left the Athawars' Triplicane lodging in a shower of abuse and tears, the household did not know where she was going. Concerned for her safety, they followed close on her heels and making enquiries, learnt that she was staying with a cousin at Egmore. Attempts to bring her back to Triplicane were resisted with aggressive rudeness. Puzzled at the violence of her resentment the Athawars could do nothing further and resigned themselves to the situation.

A week afterwards, almost at the end of February, a wire came to Gopinath from Kedaram. It was from Sakaram and said, "Please come at once." The Athawars could make nothing of it except that it was clearly something very urgent.

"Why can he not write and say what the matter is?" complained Vaman Janardhan.

"Sakaram knows no better," said Raghunath. "He rarely writes and when he does his epistles are telegraphic in their brevity. No wonder, then, his telegrams aren't more explicit."

"I don't think anything can be the matter. It is probably something concerning the harvest. Poor Sakaram knows nothing about cultivation and so he is calling me up, I think," said Gopinath.

"Yes," smiled Raghunath. "He is the type that talks about 'paddy trees'."

Aunt Tholasi, who was deep in thought, suggested, "It is that woman, Kamakshi. I think you had better

go at once, Gopinath. Something tells me that that Kavutapur woman has been giving trouble."

Saku Bai came in at the moment with Girija Bai from the Parthasarathi temple where they had been for the midday worship. Saku handed to Gopinath the sanctified saffron powder she had brought from the temple. The brothers and their wives applied the saffron to their foreheads. Gopinath told Saku of the wire that had been received. Like Aunt Tholasi, Saku Bai thought immediately of Kamakshi Bai. Poor Sakaram must be in some appalling difficulty; relief should be sent at once.

Girija Bai was strangely silent. She made a low exclamation, "Some misfortune!" and went inside without saying another word.

That very evening Gopinath set out for Kedaram and, at the last moment, Aunt Tholasi decided to accompany him. She feared that, if her suspicions should prove to be well-founded, Gopinath would find himself unequal to the situation. He was the last person to take command of a difficult situation or put Kamakshi in her place. After all, when it came to dealing with a woman, no man was ever adequate. She would gladly have sent Saku, who would have out-talked Kamakshi, but Saku was required at Triplicane where she had Ambu and Susila on her hands.

The train deposited Gopinath and his Aunt at Kedaram at about half past eight. They got into the waiting bullock cart and reached Athawar House where the worst became immediately manifest. A violent quarrel between Sakaram and Kamakshi was in progress. Sakaram was sitting on the swing in the hall,

the very picture of misery. There he sat with his fine ivory-coloured chest covered with ink, which had just splashed the floor as well. His *vina*, which was close by and which he loved and worshipped, had also been stained with ink. A broken ink bottle lay near the wall.

At sight of Gopinath and Aunt Tholasi, Sakaram burst into tears. Gopinath, who could understand nothing, gazed in mute astonishment. Aunt Tholasi, after a minute's petrifaction, went up to Sakaram and, taking his hands in hers, asked him in a faltering voice:

"My dear Sakaram, what is the matter? I have never seen you like this before."

Sakaram dried his tears and recovering his composure shook his head but said nothing. All Aunt Tholasi's attempts to make him speak were fruitless.

Subbaraya Pothi, the Canarese cook, came up and stood at a respectful distance; as Gopinath remained motionless with his vacant stare, Aunt Tholasi went towards the cook, anxious for news of what had happened. The cook looked furtively in the direction of the kitchen where Kamakshi Bai had taken refuge at sight of Gopinath and his aunt. He beckoned to Tholasi Bai to advance towards the passage and there told her his story. Gopinath, recovering from his surprise, mechanically joined them.

"Kamakshi Bai came here ten days ago," said Subbaraya Pothi. "Since then there has been no peace in the house. Sakaram is but a young man and does not know the world. But she won't understand. She has been at him from morning to night all these days.

But throwing an ink bottle at poor Sakaram Raoji—that is too bad."

"Throwing an ink bottle! Why? What has he done? What is there she refuses to understand? Talk sense, Subbaraya."

Subbaraya Pothi made as if to speak, but the words died on his lips. Aunt Tholasi encouraged him.

"Speak out, man. Come on."

"It is the dancing-girl, Lalita," said Subbaraya Pothi in a low voice, as if he were referring to something unholy.

"Is that all? Is it for this that you are blinking like a strolling beggar that has stolen a monkey?" snapped Gopinath, recovering his speech.

Aunt Tholasi bade him be silent. Then, turning to Subbaraya Pothi, she asked him where the dancing-girl came in and why she came in at all.

"She does not come in anywhere at all, at any rate, not to my knowledge. Somebody seems to have gone and told Kamakshi Bai a lot of tales. All that I know is that Kamakshi Bai came in a fury and taxed Sakaram Raoji with having sold himself to the dancing-girl."

"Sakaram sold himself to the dancing-girl! It cannot be true. It is a malicious lie," vehemently asserted Gopinath. He felt scandalised, and began to unbutton the tight-fitting coat which he always wore when travelling.

"Well, what did Sakaram say?" asked Tholasi Bai.

"He denied it," answered Subbaraya Pothi. "Swore there was nothing in it, but she wouldn't listen. She was like a woman possessed."

"But is there anything in it, Subbaraya Pothi? Do not hide anything from me, please. And who is the dancing-girl?"

"It is said to be Lalita. I swear there is nothing in it. So far as I am aware, Sakaram just visits her now and again and has some music in her house. But he goes there only by day and he is back by sundown at the latest."

"Sakaram visiting the dancing-girl, Lalita, in her house!" exclaimed Aunt Tholasi in a tone of startled surprise. "But how did Kamakshi Bai come to know?"

"She must have heard of it from Girija Bai."

"Girija Bai!"

"She was here in December, madam, and sensed what was going on and was nosing round to find out all about it. I think she must have told Kamakshi Bai about this."

Aunt Tholasi reflected for a minute while Gopinath continued gazing, wide-eyed.

"I think you are right, Subbaraya. She must have sent word to Kavutapur—and she knows Kamakshi's people. I now understand the whispered conferences at Triplicane, Gopinath."

"The interfering old cat!" exclaimed Gopinath, surprised out of his habitual good nature.

They all returned to the hall. Sakaram had changed his *dhoti* and washed his face, and was moodily removing the ink stains from his beloved *vina*.

"What has this *vina* done to deserve this?" said Aunt Tholasi with a lump in her throat. To her it amounted to desecration as the instrument was associated with Saraswati, the goddess of learning.

But Kamakshi Bai had heard Aunt Tholasi's exclamation. She came out from her hiding-place, shouting at the top of her voice:

"What has this poor *vina* done! Do you wish to know? It has ruined me! It has taken this wretched nephew of yours to a public prostitute! Made him forget his duty to me! He has sold himself to her, body and soul, and become her body slave. Cursed be the hour when I married him."

Aunt Tholasi retained her composure. She said:

"When wedded wives forsake their husbands and run away to their parents' houses, I suppose the man has the right to do what he likes with himself. If what you say is true, it is you who have driven him to it. A fine woman, indeed, to curse the day when you married an Athawar!"

"Marry an Athawar! I might have married a ruined wall instead. An Athawar, indeed! A pitiful sneak who deserts his wedded wife and takes to a harlot!" She worked herself up into a state of ungovernable rage, gesticulating wildly. "Not content with ruining me, he goes and sends a wire to you! What did he think I was going to do? Was I going to eat him up? And you, you pitiful dotards, you come here as if somebody has died and you haven't even as much shame as would keep you from openly taking his side against me!"

Aunt Tholasi was silenced. She could not stand up to this orgy of violent indignation.

Gopinath, stung into reproof, asked if, as a woman, she was not ashamed of herself.

"What are you, a Surpanaka or a Thātaki?"

At this, Kamakshi lost all remaining control of herself. Throwing her arms up in the air, she shrieked:

"Surpanaka, Thātaki and Idumbi, all rolled into one. You are all gods and goddesses and I am the only *Asura* in your midst!"

Words failed her. She choked and stuttered in her rage; then, suddenly turning, she ran upstairs and locked herself inside her room. When Subbaraya Pothi took her her food later, she refused to touch it. At about six in the evening she packed her things and, without a word to anybody, went straight to the station, took a ticket to Madras and caught the train which connected with the Boat Mail at Sirur.

CHAPTER XI.

On the day fixed for the trial of Chandra Kanta De, Gandindi was in a state of great excitement. From a very early hour in the morning large crowds began to gather in front of the Sub-Divisional Magistrate's Court. A demonstration was expected and so the Police were there in force to maintain order. It was further expected that De would not defend himself and his conviction was regarded as a foregone conclusion. That he had disobeyed a valid order and thus deliberately brought himself within the law, was well understood but this did not prevent the discontented from questioning the need or wisdom of any such order at all. Lakshman Doss and his friends took the fullest advantage of the prevalent state of public feeling and lost no opportunity of impressing upon the people the efficacy of non-co-operation as the only remedy for their ills. A *hartal* was declared with the result that not a single shop was opened on the date of the trial and there were released for such devilment as might be toward a vast number of persons who otherwise would have been busy with buying and selling. But it was the boys of the local High School who, in the eyes of the Congress Committee, covered themselves with glory on the occasion. A number of them had marched in a body to the Headmaster and demanded a holiday to enable them to attend the trial. The Headmaster had sternly declined and warned the head of the deputation, Narayan Doss, that he was

leading the boys into mischief and that, if he did not behave himself, he would have to make an example of him. Narayan Doss, who was unperturbed, had replied, "I would thank you to do it, sir, and I hope the rest of the school will follow my example and leave the school. That would be a good thing for the country." And he impudently quoted Bishop Latimer, burning at the stake, on the lighting of candles that would never be put out.

"A very good use you are putting your history to," fumed the Headmaster, and dismissed the deputation. The poor dominie did not sleep that night but prayed aloud that nothing untoward might happen on the morrow. But the boys conspired and caballed amongst themselves and gave themselves a holiday. They went to work with a will and posted pickets to prevent any student who might be so inclined from reaching the school.

The High School stood right in front of the Sub-Divisional Magistrate's Court and so the occupants were very favourably situated to see everything that was going forward. The persuasions of the teachers, who made frantic eleventh-hour attempts to send the boys to their classes, were unavailing, and the entire school staff did the next best thing under the circumstances, stationing themselves on the verandah with a view to prevent the boys getting into any mischief. Some of the boys, more adventurous than the rest, had invaded the Sub-Divisional Magistrate's Court and found for themselves inconspicuous positions behind the bar. Venkatramani was one of these and, though shaking with trepidation at the likelihood of his being

discovered by his father, went into the copyists' room, wherefrom he could see all that was taking place. The clerks at work there permitted him to stay, not only because he was their officer's son, but, as they were careful to explain when subsequently castigated by Anantakrishna, because things outside wore such a bad look that they thought that the lad was safest inside the room.

Just before eleven, Chandra Kanta De arrived in a closed car, escorted by Stent's Deputy, a young Indian officer; and on the stroke of the hour Anantakrishna Aiyar took up the case. The Court house was filled to its utmost capacity with legal practitioners, policemen and visitors. By the side of Chandra Kanta was seated Chakradara Rao, whose forced mirthfulness did not disguise his very evident embarrassment. Lakshman Doss was there, very pleased with himself and cracking jokes about its probably being his turn next. The Deputy Superintendent of Police, who was sitting next to Chandra Kanta thought Doss was a bounder, and could not help muttering to his neighbour that it would be long before Government troubled itself about gas-bags. Chandra Kanta heard this and, turning to the Deputy, told him with a smile, "My dear fellow, you are mistaken. He is the one fellow here who counts. Take my word for it."

As soon as the case was called, Anantakrishna Aiyar asked, "Mr. De, are you represented by counsel?" Chandra Kanta rose in his seat and with a bow to the Court said, "No, Sir. I may tell you straightaway that I do not propose to participate in the proceedings at all." He added, smiling pleasantly, (De's smile was

the most charming and effective gift which the fairies had given him at his christening) "And that is what I would like everyone here present to do," and indicated by a bow that he included even the learned Magistrate in the desired category of non-co-operators. The proposal was received with laughter at the bar. And Anantakrishna himself repressed a smile.

The Inspector of Police was the first witness to be examined; he proved the meeting at the Town Hall, the serving of the Magistrate's order on the accused and the accused's deliberate defiance of it. Sabapathi Mudaliar, the Sub-Magistrate of Gandindi, came next. He was a very timid man, promoted from the ranks, and he hated going into the box. He deposed that he had passed the order in question, prohibiting the accused from addressing any public gathering during his stay at Gandindi. "Why did you pass the order?" asked the officer who was conducting the prosecution.

"Because the police apprehended a breach of the peace," replied Sabapathi innocently.

"Not because *he* did," said Chandra Kanta in a stage whisper, causing a good deal of merriment.

"I can act upon a police report," volunteered Sabapathi, and was proceeding to justify his order when Anantakrishna, who knew his man, cut him short, observing that they were concerned only with his passing of the order and not with the reasons for it. "There are none, and he knows it," whispered Chandra Kanta, and another titter passed through the Court.

"Why did you pass the order?" said Anantakrishna crossly. The witness at last answered that he did so

because he was satisfied that a breach of the peace was likely.

The prosecution now closed its case, and Chandra Kanta was asked if he pleaded guilty to it or not. Chandra Kanta, having already declined to take part in the proceedings, remained silent. A few legal formalities were then gone through and then Anantakrishna Aiyar proceeded to deliver the judgment.

He said, "It is to be regretted, Mr. De, that you have declined to participate in the proceedings and give the Court such assistance as lies in your power to enable it to come to a conclusion on the matter. The evidence, however, leaves no room for doubt that you deliberately set yourself to disobey a perfectly legal order passed by a competent magistrate. You are therefore clearly guilty of an offence under Section 188 of the Indian Penal Code and I now proceed to pass sentence upon you. In doing so, I bear in mind the fact that your disobedience of the order was more nominal than real and that it had no untoward consequences, though it was calculated to lead to a breach of the peace. A sentence of fine would have met the needs of the case, but as your declared creed makes it certain that you will not pay the fine, I sentence you to undergo simple imprisonment for a month."

The news was carried outside to the waiting crowd and immediately huge shouts of 'Chandra Kanta Ki Jai' rent the air. A car was brought and De, escorted by the Deputy Superintendent, was driven away to jail in a different direction from that in which he had come. Seeing the car drive away, the crowd rushed towards it to catch a glimpse of Chandra Kanta but they were

just too late and the Police restrained them with difficulty. Disappointment at being baulked and anger at the sentence suddenly rose to fever heat; the crowd turned savage. There was a rush for the Sub-Divisional Magistrate's Court; shouting men battered the doors which fortunately had been barred. Meanwhile, the Police Sergeant who had diverted Chandra Kanta's car, having gone as far as a turning near the Court to keep the road clear, returned and was greeted with jeers by the crowd, which began to fling abuse at the assembled police. The Sergeant lost his temper and ordered his men to charge the crowd, when someone from behind said, "I say, look, Sergeant Pride is dancing with delight."

The Sergeant turned, when someone else remarked. "See, how sweet he looks!" This was greeted with a shout of laughter and the Sergeant was proceeding to seize the speaker, when somebody else shouted, "See, good men of Gandindi, here is law and order marching on a pair of stilts."

Pride's legs were long and lean and he knew it; he completely lost his head and, clutching a constable's baton, charged the crowd in front of him which was increasing in numbers every minute.

Right in front of him, grinning like Mephistopheles, stood a local politician, decked in a white *khaddar* cap. It acted as a red rag on Pride, who, making a bound, seized the cap and flung it on the ground. As he did so, a stone was flung at him which narrowly missed his right temple and knocked off his helmet. Uproarious laughter followed this and Sergeant Pride, completely losing any vestige of self-control which he had so far

retained, struck out wildly and fetched a smart rap on the Sanskrit master of the local High School, who was there not from any desire or intention but because he had become stranded in his efforts to make his way home. He was a harmless, inoffensive sort of person, on whom the boys used to play countless practical jokes; the attack on this non-combatant enraged the boys present and, one of them, picking up a stone from the ground, flung it at the Sergeant. It caught him neatly on the chin, drawing forth a spurt of blood which dripped over his uniform. The policemen on duty made a wild effort to catch the boys but the crowd had swollen to such enormous proportions that it was as much as they could do to maintain their position. Brickbats began to fly about, shouts of Gandhi-ki-jai and Chandra Kanta-ki-jai rose on all sides, while a portion of the crowd separating from the main body rushed off to stone the police station. The situation was slipping out of control when the Collector arrived on the scene, accompanied by Stent, at the head of a party of Reserve Police. Branksome was on horseback and at sight of him, the crowd stayed its hand. It was a remarkable demonstration of their regard for a good officer and Branksome took advantage of the breathing-space thus obtained, to speak to a few prominent businessmen, who instantly rallied to the side of authority and succeeded in preventing the further progress of the riot. Broken up, disintegrated, and beginning to laugh again, the crowd slowly dispersed.

Branksome went straight to the High School where there was serious trouble. The boys were made to stand in a row and Pride was asked to pick out his

assailants. The sight of the boys made him furious and his recollection of the faces noticed by him was of the feeblest; determined to identify some one, he proceeded *faute de mieux* to pick out Venkatramani. Pride did not know where he had seen Venkatramani, but his face was familiar in a vague way and this seemed to the outraged Sergeant good enough for the moment. Branksome was taken aback; he was sure in his mind that Pride was making some frightful mistake.

"Are you sure that he is the boy who struck you, Pride?" asked the Collector.

"I'm pretty sure, sir," replied the Sergeant with a puzzled look on his face. "He was right in the middle of them and I seem to remember seeing him with a stone in his hand, that big," he said, suggesting the size of a tennis-ball.

The Collector called Venkatramani to him. He asked him, not unkindly, "You hear what the Sergeant says? Did you hit him?"

"No, sir," came the reply, rapped out like a musket shot and it carried immediate conviction to the Collector's mind.

"He says he saw you with a stone in your hand."

"He is dreaming," replied Venkatramani. A suppressed titter ran through the line of boys.

"Silence!" shouted the Headmaster, who was in an agony of fright as to the sequel and its possible bearing on his future career.

"Were you present in the crowd?" asked Branksome.

"I was, sir," promptly answered Venkatramani.

"Did you notice Sergeant Pride being hit?"

"Yes."

"Then you probably know who struck him?"

It was a tense moment. Would the Sub-Divisional Officer's son tell? The Headmaster, hoping against hope, put up a silent prayer that Venkatramani would speak out and make things easy for himself. Venkatramani, however, did not reply. He merely looked straight in front of him.

The Collector repeated the question, severity in his voice. Still, there was no answer. Then, he said warningly, "I am afraid it will go hard with you, Venkatramani, if you don't speak out."

Venkatramani was silent for a minute. He then replied quietly, "You must excuse me, sir, I am very sorry, but I cannot tell."

The Headmaster intervened with a pompous reference to his powers. "Remember, Venkatramani, the S.S.L.C. examination is near at hand and I can prevent you from sitting for it."

Venkatramani was unmoved. Branksome, puzzled and hating his task, sat stroking his chin. He decided to try a new line. "Do you know why Sergeant Pride was struck?"

"Yes," replied Venkatramani, without hesitation. "He hit the Sanskrit master who was only trying to find a way home through the crowd. When the master turned to remonstrate, the Sergeant caught him by the scruff of the neck and pushed him away, calling him a *soor*. The boys could not stand this and so they hit him."

"I presume you felt like hitting him too?" asked Branksome.

"I did and I would have hit him if I had found a stone handy. He was beastly rude."

"Do you suggest that Sergeant Pride was rude without sufficient reason?"

"No," replied Venkatramani, candidly. "The crowd had been very nasty to him and really, I don't think Sergeant Pride meant to be so rough."

After a few more questions, which, however, did not carry the investigation very far, the Collector left, telling the Headmaster that the police would see him again; meantime he must discover the boys who were responsible for the attack on the Sergeant.

Instantly, Venkatramani became the hero of the hour; there were a few cynics, of course, who said that the boy's father would contrive to worm out the secret from him and that all his spectacular refusal to speak out would turn out to be a mere pose. But Anantakrishna, who was rather pleased with the attitude of his son, made no attempt whatsoever to sound him on the point, saying that as the matter was in the hands of the police there was no need for him to embark upon a private family investigation.

In the end Narayan Doss and two others were expelled from school on the ground that they had been the ringleaders of the movement to stay away from school on the day of Chandra Kanta's trial and that they were responsible for what was described as "a grossly unprovoked attack upon a police officer who was engaged in the discharge of his duty."

"It is an awful shame," said Venkatramani, throw-

ing his books on the table when he returned from school.

"What is a shame?" asked his father, who knew what Venkatramani was referring to.

"The expulsion of Narayan Doss, Seshiah and Chowdhri. What have they done which the rest of us did not do?"

"Did you hit Sergeant Pride?"

"I didn't, but neither did any of the three fellows who have been sent out," replied Venkatramani, with heat.

"Well, if the boys won't tell who actually hit a person, then we have no resource except to act upon such evidence as is available."

"Oh! What a farce this evidence business is!" sneered Venkatramani.

"In any case, they were responsible for holding up work on the day of the trial and such a thing cannot go unpunished," explained Anantakrishna.

"In that case, all of us should be punished. We were all for it, I for one," argued Venkatramani.

"Then you may thank your stars that you go scot-free," said Anantakrishna. But Venkatramani was in no mood for thanks.

"We will kick up a row over this. If the Headmaster does not cancel the order, let him look out for himself. And with the school final examination coming on next week!"

"You should have thought of that before," said Anantakrishna.

In spite of his apparent equanimity, Anantakrishna was very much worried about his son. He did not

like Venkatramani's association with Narayan Doss and his open professions of sympathy with the Congress view. He reproved himself for not having taken more care over his son's political opinions. Was there perhaps more in his son's attitude than a mere explosion of generous anger on behalf of his school-mates? Was there—unpleasant thought—a definite revolutionary bent?

His guess was justified. What followed struck him like a bombshell. Venkatramani headed a deputation to the Headmaster, demanding the immediate cancellation of the order expelling Narayan Doss, Seshiah and Chowdhri. When the Headmaster, summoning all his dignity, told the deputationists that, if they did not withdraw within a few given seconds, a similar punishment would await them, they returned with a look of sullen triumph. They would all stay away in a body from the examination and cheat the Headmaster of the results on which he laid so much store.

When the day of the examination came, however, most of the boys wavered in their resolution, and as the hour struck they trooped in shamefacedly and received the question papers. But a round dozen stayed away, Venkatramani among them. He went home and told his father that he had done with school.

Anantakrishna looked at the clock. It was twelve and there was no question of sending the boy back to the examination hall. Very sadly he asked his son, "So, what do you propose to do with yourself?"

"Join Mahatma Gandhi," replied Venkatramani simply.

Anantakrishna Aiyar made no reply. He turned on his heel and strode back to his office room. The *duffedar* told the office later that his master's eyes were glistening and that he had never seen his master betray emotion before; the 'little master' must have done something very wrong indeed to make his father feel so acutely.

Anantakrishna bared his heart in a letter to his father. He said it must have been in a most inauspicious hour that he left for Gandindi. Everything had miscarried. The politicians of the place had got out of hand despite their best efforts to keep the district contented and happy and they had wounded him in a most vital part by seducing his son into prematurely adopting their barren creed. The iron had entered his soul.

On the very next day, he had a wire from his father in reply. "Send Venkatramani home immediately." And packed off Venkatramani was the same evening to Kedaram. Anantakrishna's manner was stern and his wife was in tears, but Venkatramani was unrepentant. When the *peon* returned from the station and told his master that a number of the local Congressmen had assembled on the platform with Lakshman Doss at their head and given Venkatramani a great ovation, Anantakrishna said,

"Thank Heaven he is out of the poison belt. It might easily have been too late."

It was a very shamefaced lad that Raghunath met at Kedaram when Venkatramani got down from his carriage. Venkatramani had slept the sleep of healthy boyhood and when he woke up at morning he was strangely sad. He felt that, in some unaccountable

way, he had landed himself in a morass. He had missed his examination for which he had been preparing himself by hard work. The talk in Branksome's drawing-room came back to his mind and, as the train sped along, Venkatramani wondered whether he had not made an ass of himself. How was his father feeling? A spasm shot through him at the thought that he must have hurt his father deeply and he was strangely moved. His father loved him and had denied him nothing. He was devoted to his father and had even told him his boyish confidences. His mother had been very sad at his defection and he was sure his dear old grandfather would be sadder still.

Anantarama Aiyar had always held before him the ideal of Rama, the hero of the *Ramayana,* whose greatest virtue was his readiness to obey his father's lightest wish. Often of a night, after supper, in the open courtyard, Chudamani Anantarama Aiyar would tell him the story of the Ramayana. And, at the end of each episode, he would point a moral and ask his grandson,

"When you grow up, you must follow Sri Rama's example. Will you, Venkatramani?", and Venkatramani would answer, "Yes." And now, he had fallen at the first shot. He had failed his father at the very start, failed his grandfather, failed Rama. Idiot! idiot—and worse.

It was all very confusing and Venkatramani could not puzzle it out. But the morning air was fresh and cool and as the trees and telegraph poles rushed past he forgot his troubles gazing on the flitting landscape of bare, brown paddy fields, intersected by little

channels, where dark-skinned men, clad in loin-cloths, laboured with sickle and scythe. The train came to a stop at Sirur, the change for Kedaram. The keen morning air had given him an appetite and bolting a few steaming rice-cakes, spiced with *chutney* and gingelly-oil, and a scalding cup of coffee, he took his seat on the Kedaram passenger. And it was not until the signals of Kedaram Junction hove in sight and the maze of rails flew past, that his thoughts again took on a sombre hue.

Raghunath was at the far end of the platform and, sighting Venkatramani, he made leisurely for his carriage. "Hullo, little Gandhi," he greeted. "So you have thrown up the sponge. What possessed you to do it, man?"

Venkatramani was not sure whether Raghunath was not laughing at him and, in any case, that 'little Gandhi' was hardly fair, so he hung down his head. When Raghunath spoke again it was more encouraging.

"Don't be down-hearted, my dear fellow. You have done nothing to be ashamed of. You need not have begun so early, still it does not matter. I hope people older than you will follow your example.

At the house Anantarama Aiyar received his grandson kindly and gave no hint by word or act that he bore him any resentment.

"Go and have a wash, Venkatramani. I hope you slept well on the train," he said, fingering his eyelids as if he could judge by touch the amount of sleep he had had. "Why didn't your father send someone with you?"

"No need, grandfather. I can travel alone."

"That you can and go farther than most," said Raghunath. But Venkatramani shook his head in silence.

Remorseful, puzzled, a prey to all manner of doubts, he went into the house.

PART TWO
1925 - 1928

CHAPTER XII.

The passing of four quiet years confirmed Gopinath in his view that the move to Kedaram was a wise step. The newly-acquired house had wrought no ill effects; on the other hand, the family flourished, putting forth new shoots. Gopinath's married daughters came to Athawar House from time to time and made Gopinath a grandfather several times over. Uma had recently given birth to a girl who threatened to rival Raghunath's daughter, Sona, in the affections of the family. Since coming to Athawar House, Vaman had become the father of another boy whom Gopinath, in pride of heart, hailed as the future restorer of the Athawar glories. Ambu was a great deal better than she had been for years and even Sumitra Bai, Gopinath's invalid wife, had ceased to complain of those vague aches in various limbs which used to keep Sadayan busy fetching the doctor.

Vaman, however, clung to his depression—and not without cause. Never an advocate of the move to Kedaram, he was now becoming an alarmist. His mournful anticipations had, in a sense, come true. The family was growing indeed, but its funds had withered. It was worse, they were in a financial morass into which they seemed to be dragged deeper and deeper every day. At Syamalapuri, the Athawars, in spite of all their unwise spendings, had remained on the right side of the ledger. But now,—Vaman could not bring himself to think of it. He was hot with shame at the

thought of the Athawars' indebtedness to Atmaram Sait—that soft-spoken shark who bit into the entrails of any unfortunate person who got into his grasp. Any day—any day—Atmaram might bring a suit for recovery. The purchase of Athawar House had been unwise; horribly unwise. They had been compelled to borrow money to complete the repairs; then Uma's marriage on a scale which seemed to Vaman criminal in its extravagance; the trip to Madras, feasts and festivals, all had added to the load of debt which was going up by leaps and bounds.

Thus Vaman. But Gopinath, placid and serene as ever, stuck to the routine of the happy householder. Up with the sun, he went for an early morning stroll among the paddy fields by the river accompanied by the farm servant, Sadayan, discussing the prospects of the season. Returning home in time for an early bath, he finished his ablutions and went to worship in the small shrine at home where the family gods were installed. There was an ancestral family priest who was nominally in charge of the *sanctum* and the worship, but Gopinath did not care to commit his soul to the keeping of a hired priest. He took his religious duties seriously and held that the family communion with its gods should be conducted through its accredited representative and head, unless his pre-occupation with worldly affairs stood in the way. In the old days when the Athawars were busy with affairs of state, there might have been some justification for the employment of a substitute through whom they maintained touch with the family deities. But the Athawars had long since ceased to have anything to

do with princes and politics and the need for vicarious worship had passed. Ramachar, the family priest, was therefore continued simply because he was a link with the past; Ramachar and his father before him, back to the days of the first Athawars, had been associated with the family worship and Gopinath would not tamper with this ancient association. Vaman Janardhan would have retrenched on the priest, but Gopinath maintained that a *prohit* was as much a part of the family inheritance as their lands and houses and he declared that as long as he had the means for a meal, Ramachar would have a share of it.

To Gopinath himself, his morning worship was the ideal introduction to the day. He loved the gracious ritual and the atmosphere of holiness which was induced by sincere devotion. When at the close of the day's worship, marked by ecstatic recitations of *mantras* and holy texts, he passed round the consecrated camphor to the assembled family, he felt a curious exaltation of spirit which communicated itself to those present. To him it was a nerve tonic, a mental purifier and a spiritual reviver. He felt as if he had come into almost physical contact with the old friendly gods, with Gopalakrishna, playing the flute at Brindavan, and with Anjaneya, foremost devotee of Vishnu. His faith in his gods was something real and it was as if he succeeded in establishing contacts with the forces of Nature. But Gopinath could also come down to flesh and blood realities. He laughingly attributed his physical and mental health to his religious exercises, and of health in both these directions he had certainly an ample supply.

And Gopinath's optimism seemed for the moment justified. For some years after the purchase of Athawar House, the season had failed; but now the tide had turned and there had been a rich harvest. In the street in front of their house there was a stream of bullock *bandies* stacked with sacks of paddy which it did the Athawars good to see. They were glad and grateful; Gopinath was almost jaunty with gratification.

"Our difficulties are at an end now, Vaman," he said, gaily. But Vaman knew better.

"Don't you agree, *athya?*" asked Gopinath, hunting for encouragement.

"I hope so," replied Aunt Tholasi Bai. "But we must perform the vow I took long ago, Gopinath. Ambu is so much better and now, when things are looking up, I had better go to Benares and thank Visweswar for all his mercies."

"Do, *athya,* fix a date and start," readily agreed her cheerful nephew.

But the Benares visit hung in the air; another matter nearer home claimed the Athawars' attention. A vacancy had arisen in the District Board of Kedaram and Gopinath was persuaded to stand for election. Raghunath was against it altogether; he hated the idea of an Athawar seeking election at a time when the whole country had declared for Non-co-operation, and had gone in for wholesale boycott of Councils of every description. But Gopinath would not be converted. He had always had a sneaking fondness for official and quasi-official positions and when a few friends, with a

little official backing, urged him to contest the vacant seat he nibbled vigorously at the bait.

Raghunath's high-souled talk about Non-co-operation and the Congress creed made very little impression on him. In fact, it was a language which he scarcely understood. "Non-co-operate with Government! What an extraordinary idea! How can one set oneself up against a powerful Government! It would be stupendous folly." And he proceeded to quote verses from ancient Sanskrit works about loyalty to the king and the futility of rebelling against the king and his government, till Raghunath gave up the attempt to dissuade him in disgust. Already Gopinath saw himself in imagination dressed in the ancestral long coat of crimson-coloured silk, held at the chest with a frog, a Poona *puggree* on his head, hobnobbing with Collectors and Deputy Collectors, and making himself heard in the affairs of local administration. He had heard many a tale of wrong, instances of petty official oppression and corruption in the execution of public works. Gopinath persuaded himself that he would stop all that. Poor Gopinath! Little did he dream that he would have been easily out-talked by the craftier breed on the Board. But, as even his rebel brother, Raghunath, was ready to acknowledge, given a chance Gopinath would have done his duty by the public fearlessly. Given a chance—yes: but the chance was withheld.

Gopinath would have made a better District Board member than many; but his apple cart was upset in a totally unexpected fashion. On the last day fixed for nominations, Atmaram Sait had come into the

field as a candidate and his first step had been to send a polite but firm request to Gopinath to withdraw from the contest. Gopinath, who knew exactly where he stood, tried negotiation; but Atmaram began to talk blandly, but resolutely, of suits for moneys due, and Gopinath's allegiance to his party wavered. When Raghunath heard of Atmaram's tactics, he felt so scandalised that he almost withdrew his opposition. The family sense was roused and Raghunath, his blood now up, played with the idea of raising a loan on the mortgage of the family properties and paying off the Sait, but a little reflection convinced him that it was impossible to raise a loan of that magnitude so easily. In fact, there was nothing to do but to lower the Athawar flag and cave in.

Within six weeks it was lowered further still; the moment dreaded, nay, foreseen by Vaman, arrived; the Athawars could not pay Atmaram his interest. Lowering the flag till it almost touched the ground, they invited their creditor to a discussion of terms. The Sait had made his calculations and had come prepared to take a mortgage of the Athawar lands at Syamalapuri. He knew that the Athawars could not pay, that he would necessarily have to sue them and bring their properties to sale and purchase them in Court auction. All this would take time and cost him a pretty penny into the bargain. It would, therefore, be a good piece of business to get a mortgage of the lands at once and sue on it later on, if necessary. To this end he directed the conversation, protesting at every turn that he was making this concession and that only out of consideration for the family.

Gopinath and Raghunath bowed before the blast, and the negotiations were concluded. Atmaram Sait was to take a mortgage of the lands at Syamalapuri and a seven-year period was fixed for payment. It was stipulated that the interest accruing annually should be paid every year at the commencement of the *fasli;* default in making the payment would leave the Sait free to sue for the entire amount due on the bond. And one inflexible term of the negotiations was that Gopinath should withdraw from the contest for the District Board vacancy. When, at the end of the day, Atmaram Sait walked out of Anantarama Aiyar's house with a draft of the proposed mortgage deed and Gopinath's signed announcement withdrawing his candidature, he did so with his head held as high as those of the Athawars were low.

CHAPTER XIII.

The temporal set-back of the Athawars made them long the more for intensive spiritual consolation and Aunt Tholasi Bai's mind went back and back to the Benares idea. She was convinced that there was an element of divine displeasure in their recent troubles and she could not forgive herself for having delayed the pilgrimage so long.

Gopinath had never made any difficulties about it; so far as he was concerned, she could have gone to Benares any time she liked. It was Vaman who, as usual, had been the stumbling-block. Aunt Tholasi would not go without Vaman and his wife; the vow had been taken with special reference to his branch of the family and Ambu in particular. But now Aunt Tholasi pleaded hard and Gopinath added his voice to hers; and when these two joined forces, Vaman, for all his surliness, could scarcely resist.

It was decided therefore that Aunt Tholasi should set out for Benares towards the close of the hot weather, accompanied by Vaman and Saku, with Ambu and Vaman's baby boy. The pilgrimage resolved on, Athawar House fell into a whirl of excitement; what stores to carry, what pickles to take and in what quantity, were fascinating items which kept the Athawars pleasantly occupied. Saku could not make up her mind about the *saris* she should take with her; she made a selection, changed it, and finally decided to take all her best ones. Vaman protested despairingly.

"You would simply make yourself a gift and a temptation to thieves and robbers."

"Listen to him," laughed Saku, "as if there can be fear of thieves and robbers in Kashi!"

Aunt Tholasi made peace. In the result, Saku took all her best *saris* with her but left her more valuable jewels behind.

And so the Athawars embarked and in a clear coldish dawn the Punjab Mail drew them into Moghal Serai Junction. Vaman Janardhan, disentangling himself from the third-class carriage where they had been packed, dropped on to the platform with a scared expression, seized a brass *kuja* from his wife's hands and rushed to the tap to fetch water. The train was incapable of moving for half-an-hour but Vaman was subject to strange fancies that trains, in some unaccountable way, would start, leaving him behind. Blear-eyed and badly shaken by the journey, he was anxious to get to the end of it. The five minutes' wait at the tap, where he was constantly elbowed out by other travellers too much in a hurry to stand on ceremony, seemed to him like eternity and, after fitfully filling his *kuja* with water, he raced back to his compartment, relieved to find that his party remained intact and that the train had not played him false. To his further delight, they now had the carriage practically to themselves.

Aunt Tholasi, who occupied a corner, rinsed her mouth with the water which Vaman had brought and, with an obeisance in the direction of Kashi, resumed her seat, tense with anticipation of the joy of arriving in the holy city. Saku Bai followed Aunt Tholasi's

example and then proceeded to wash her daughter who had just been awakened and was staring about her with her witless look. Ambu, forced to unwilling ablutions, squirmed under her mother's firm grasp and kicked, protested and squealed vigorously.

Girija Bai, blanketed in a red-brick *sari,* began mixing coffee for the party. The long journey had discovered a bond of union between her and Vaman in their devotion to that unorthodox beverage. Girija had succeeded in adding herself to the party in spite of the hints and scarcely-veiled remonstrances of Vaman, but now he was reconciled to her company and was becoming her devoted friend. Moreover, the Athawars found a tower of strength in Girija's practical mind. Raghunath had given Saku Bai a thermos flask for the benefit of Vaman's baby, but Saku, who did not understand it, passed it over to Girija, who made full use of it, filling it with coffee-decoction from stage to stage. At Buxar she had bought milk, which was plentifully sold in pots of clay. Aunt Tholasi never drank coffee. She religiously stuck to the rigorous routine of a Hindu widow and never allowed even a drop of water to cross her lips till noon, when, after the family had dined, she took her single meal of the day. Girija Bai had no such scruples; unwashed and prayerless, she soaked herself in coffee at regular intervals till dinner-time.

After the Athawars were served, Girija Bai sent a tumbler of coffee to a fellow-passenger from the Tamil country who had unexpectedly joined them at Madras. This was Vageesam Pillai, the manager, as he called himself, of a small *mutt* on the banks of the Papa-

vimochani. Girija Bai had known him previously and when she caught sight of him gathering himself and his belongings into the Calcutta Mail, she asked him where he was going and was mightily pleased when she learnt that he was also bound for Benares. The Athawars invited him to share their compartment as it was so reassuring to have the company of a man from one's own province when going on a long journey. Even Vaman had the unthinking faith of his kind in the necessary honesty of fellow-passengers who hailed from the same neighbourhood. And Vageesam Pillai was so transparently trustworthy. He was covered from head to foot with sacred ashes and his manner was so suave and his invocation of the trident-bearing mendicant Lord of Tiruchendur so frequent and intimate that the Athawars considered the addition of so devout a pilgrim to their party as an indication that their undertaking was blessed.

The train at last pulled out of Moghal Serai and the Athawars craned their necks in the direction of Benares. Aunt Tholasi's face lighted up; as the train rolled over the girders of the Dufferin Bridge, she broke out into exclamations of reverent delight. "Oh, Ganga! dear mother Ganga! See, Saku," she said, like one beholding a vision, "your sorrows are at an end. *Aré,* Vaman, ask for a blessing of Mother Ganga. What a pity Gopinath couldn't come or Raghunath either!"

Vaman, who had never in all his life consciously uttered a prayer, dutifully folded his hands and muttered a few devotional rudiments.

Saku broke forth in praise of the sacred river. "Oh,

Mother Ganga! bless my poor child. I do not know for what sin of mine in a previous birth, I was burdened with such a child. Save her, oh Mother, save her, and restore her to speech and a normal life! Make her body-whole, oh divine Mother, and remove her afflictions!"

Girija Bai, with a final gulp of the coffee which Ambu had left untasted, twisted her body into the conventional attitude of prayer.

It was, in truth, a glorious sight that met their eyes, —the grand sweep of the mighty river; the gleaming facade of *caravanserais* and the rest-houses of the rich; the vast assemblage of men and women, standing waist-deep in the river to greet the morning sun with libations of the sacred water. Right in front, dominating the landscape, stood Aurangazeb's mosque, its gleaming spire caught in a 'noose of light' by the morning sun. There it stood, fronting Beni Madhav's temple, conceived as a challenge to the Hindu worship of the place, but with the advance of the years, forgetting its purpose and nestling in friendly rivalry among the shrines and temples of the sacred city.

From their serene musings the Athawars were rudely awakened when the train deposited them at Benares Station. A noisy crowd of *Gangaputras,* the exclusive priesthood of the place, surrounded them, clamouring to chaperon them during their stay in the city and asserting the most extraordinary claims to this office. Shaking themselves free of these bawling bidders for custom, the Athawars made their way to the Vasudeva Mutt, a *caravanserai* for the reception of pilgrims. It was a rambling structure and consisted of a series of

low-roofed, dimly-lighted cells, which, however, to the eyes of faith, seemed ablaze with a heritage of spiritual light left by their previous occupants.

Aunt Tholasi and Saku were bursting with impatience, so anxious were they to bathe in the Ganges. Aunt Tholasi especially, who had waited for nearly forty years for the coming of this day, chafed under the long-drawn arrangements which Vaman and Girija Bai proceeded to make for their food and comfort. At last, however, they locked up their belongings and started for the river. Their way lay through narrow streets, thronged with shrines, with worshippers from Quetta to Comorin and Brahminy bulls which moved about with lordly unconcern.

The Manikarnika Ghat, a strand of particular efficacy, where Aunt Tholasi insisted they should have their first bathe, was nearly two miles away and Tholasi Bai had never walked a longer distance than the two furlongs or so which lay between Athawar House and the Kedareswar temple at home; but such was the power of devotion that the grey-haired old lady tripped gaily along like a school-girl released for games from the class-room. She bathed in the Chakra Pushkarani and in the Manikarnika Ghat, but not until she had presided over the ablutions of her nephew and Saku Bai. She then bathed Ambu who, for a wonder, gave no trouble—a sign, according to the women, of impending divine favour. Nor was Vaman's baby spared a dip in the cold water. Tholasi Bai, assisted by Saku, immersed the child in the water, observing in gladness of heart, "Puntojee will come to great estate, Vaman. He is thrice blessed. *We* have waited till even

hope had died within us, but Mother Ganga has been pleased to receive Puntojee even before he has been weaned from his mother's breast." And Aunt Tholasi hugged the unsuspecting child to her bosom with a blessing on her lips for this latest-sent instrument of the salvation of the entire clan of Athawars. "We must call him Gangadhara, Vaman," and so, on the instant, Gangadhara he became.

Having bathed the baby, Tholasi Bai entered the water with the chastened holy joy she would have felt on entering the very presence of the God Vishnu, sitting with his consort Lakshmi in his celestial abode in Vaikunta. When she emerged from the water, there was a glow in her face as of one who had realised a life's ambition.

On the bank stood a callow youth in spectacles and a shirt of striped silk, an unmistakable B.A. When the priest handed him a spoonful of water from the Chakra Pushkarani to drink, because the young man had declined to bathe in the stagnant pool, he curled his lips and remarked, "It is filthy. I am sure it breeds malaria and typhoid and God knows what else besides." The priest praised its healing virtues and declared it rather helped to cure those diseases. But the youth was unconvinced and scornful and compromised the claims of science with those of religion, by just touching the water with his forefinger and applying it gingerly to his underlip. To his parents and to Tholasi Bai and Saku it was as nectar and they smacked their lips and felt as if all their ills had vanished at the touch of the sacred water. Down Ambu's unwilling throat

they forced a spoonful of the liquid, certain of its miraculous efficacy.

From the Manikarnika Ghat they went to the temple of Visweshwar. There suddenly they saw Vageesam Pillai, more sanctimonious than ever and in attendance upon a bearded dignitary who occupied the centre of the group. This was a tall, imposing-looking person, very well-preserved, dressed in a toga-like robe of yellow; his gimlet eyes pierced and probed all comers. Vaman and Girija Bai nodded to Vageesam Pillai and, in a few seconds, Vageesam Pillai was by their side, explaining to them that the bearded gentleman was none other than the famous Munda Kadirvelu Swami, who could turn the baser metals into gold. Girija had heard of him and was swept off her feet by finding herself in such close proximity to the great and pious man. Already she was wondering within herself whether she could not turn the Swami's reputed powers to account to reimburse the depleted family chest at home. She started whispering to a very much pre-occupied Tholasi Bai about the remarkable powers of Munda Kadirvelu Swami and how he was well worth a visit. But Aunt Tholasi listened mechanically, for she was straining her eyes to catch a glimpse of the mighty Visweshwar and to receive from the underpriest a spoonful of consecrated water and a petal of the sacred *tholasi* plant.

The first visit over, the Athawars found themselves plunged in the regular routine of sacred duties. After morning worship, they broke their fast, always excepting Tholasi Bai, and thereafter went the round of the temples that fringed the river-bank. Just before noon,

they bathed at the Manikarnika Ghat or the Panch Ganga Ghat and then called at the temple of Beni Madhav, reached by the same stairway that led to Aurangazeb's mosque, or looked in at Annapurni's shrine, always careful to reach Visweshwar's in time for the midday worship. It was a physically tired but spiritually exhilarated party which returned to the Vasudeva Mutt at about one o'clock to undertake the preparation of the meal which was usually ready by two. They rested in the afternoon, and again started on their rounds at sunset and after prayers at the temple of Visalakshi finished the long day at her spouse, Visweshwar's, to witness the *Saptarishi Puja.*

By eight, the Athawars generally returned to their lodgings when Vaman and his wife took a light supper, while Girija Bai refreshed herself with a substantial allowance of milk and fruit, and Aunt Tholasi contented herself with a cup of Ganges water.

But sometimes of an afternoon Vaman and Girija Bai would visit the Kali temple at the Dasaswamedha Ghat, to meet Kadirvelu Swami, with whom, thanks to the persistent good offices of Vageesam Pillai, they had scraped up an acquaintance. One evening, Vaman returned to the Vasudeva Mutt in high spirits, Girja Bai with him, and told Aunt Tholasi,

"Do you know, *athya,* this Swami is a most extraordinary person. He is a yogi of a high order."

That the godless Vaman could speak of spiritually-inclined persons with the accents of faith was itself a transformation which would ordinarily have filled Aunt Tholasi with gladness, as a sign of the influence of Mother Ganga; but one or two peculiarities which

she had noticed in her nephew, who had now come to look upon Girija Bai as his mentor, placed a curb on her enthusiasm.

"Is that so? He does indeed seem very religiously disposed. I think he is also well-versed in the *Saiva Siddhanta,*" she said cautiously.

Vaman had no more notion of the philosophy of the *Saiva Siddhanta* than his baby Gangadhara, but his aunt's remark seemed to him an admission of the Swami's scholarship and this gave him pleasure.

"Learning he has, of course," said Vaman. "But his yogic powers, *athya,* I tell you, are wonderful."

"Were you present at any demonstration of his powers, Vaman?" asked Aunt Tholasi, drily.

"No, I wasn't," replied Vaman, slightly embarrassed. "But I soon hope to be."

"He has acquired certain powers, Tholasi Bai," interposed Girija Bai. "Faith and devotion will work wonders."

"That they will," agreed Aunt Tholasi. "But they are rarely to be found in combination with unselfish purpose."

"This Swami is different from the rest, *athya,*" pleaded Vaman. "He can turn the baser metals into gold."

"A thoroughly useless accomplishment for a Swami. Still, I wonder. I have heard the claim made on behalf of many others but I have not seen the man who can do it."

Here was an opening. "You will see Kadirvelu Swami do it soon, *athya,*" said Vaman, and looked at Aunt Tholasi, intently.

Girija Bai struck in like one offering a tempting bait. "The Swami has offered to make a rich man of Vaman Rao."

The old lady sniffed audibly. "And how is the trick going to be done? Is he going to give Vaman potfulls of Ganges sand turned into flakes of gold?"

"No," answered Girija Bai, damped by Aunt Tholasi's lack of enthusiasm. "But the Swami has offered to put Vaman on the track of a hidden treasure."

Aunt Tholasi was not impressed; one might as well have addressed a stone wall, thought Girija.

"Where is the treasure secreted? Is it here in Kashi? In that case, Vaman should give me a share of it, for it was I that was responsible for bringing him here."

"Why, you shall have the whole of it, *athya,*" readily answered Vaman. Already, in imagination, he fancied himself possessed of all the wealth of *Kubera,* the Croesus of Indian mythology.

"But where is the treasure supposed to be hidden?" pursued Aunt Tholasi.

"That is the Swami's secret. He says that certain ceremonies will have to be performed before he can touch the treasure."

"You know there is a deity supposed to guard the treasure, and it will have to be propitiated," explained Girija Bai.

Aunt Tholasi sniffed again. "And what does the Swami make out of the deal?"

"Nothing; not a *pice,*" answered Girija Bai eagerly. "You see, he is so selfless, he does not want anything

for himself. Even the expenses he undertakes to keep at a minimum."

"How much will that be?" asked Tholasi Bai.

Girija Bai was frankly annoyed. She could not understand the huckstering spirit in which this old woman, who had already one foot in the grave, looked at her wonderful transaction.

"It will be a mere trifle," she answered. "Ordinarily it would cost a great deal, but for my sake the Swami is willing to do it for a nominal sum. You know," she continued, dropping her voice to a whisper, "the Swami once stayed at Devipadapur, engaged in renovating a temple there. There was some trouble in connection with it and Bhima Rao, my son-in-law, who was Sub-Magistrate there at the time, helped him to get over it. Since then, the Swami has been very much attached to our family. The Swami told me the whole story the other day."

"Then why go and drag poor Vaman in? The Swami may more justifiably help *you* to the treasure."

Girija Bai was still equal to the occasion. She said:

"He cannot do what the gods have not ordained. Vaman's horoscope shows that he is destined to light upon a treasure at about the present period in his life. Mine doesn't. That makes all the difference."

There was a call for Aunt Tholasi Bai from Saku, who was at the backyard of the house, and she went in. Girija Bai turned to Vaman, who had subsided on a bench in the verandah, and said:

"Your aunt is not familiar with these things, Vaman Rao, and that is why she hesitates so much."

"You can hardly call it hesitating," corrected Vaman. "She is dead against the whole idea."

Girija gave Vaman a slant look and moistened her thin lips. "It is a pity that she does not understand your responsibilities. She seems to think a lot of the Athawar inheritance. With a daughter to marry and three sons to educate, your share of the Athawar property will not go very far. Your brother Gopinath's responsibilities are at an end. He has made very good marriages for his three daughters and he has no sons to educate. As for Raghunath, he has an only daughter and his wife has some money of her own. *Your* responsibilities are just beginning and I feel that nobody realises it. You must make some money on your own score, Vaman Rao, if you are not to go under. Excuse my plain speaking. I have seen you at close quarters all these months and know how guileless you are."

Vaman Janardhan listened tongue-tied. The view presented by Girija Bai accorded so well with his own congenital apprehensions that it sensibly frightened him. He told Girija Bai that he had always striven to keep the family expenditure under strict control but his brothers had been too much for him. She was right, he must fend for himself or else he would turn out to be the fool of the family.

Aunt Tholasi returned to the verandah and Girija Bai changed the conversation, preferring to wait for a more favourable opportunity to revive it. Shortly afterwards the temple bells tolled for evening worship at Visweshwar's and the Athawars started on their round of the shrines.

CHAPTER XIV.

The repulse with which Girija Bai and Vaman had met at the hands of Aunt Tholasi did not serve to lessen their ardour in the matter of the proposed search for the hidden treasure, and presently Girija Bai found an ally in Vaman's wife. By the same method she had employed towards Vaman, she succeeded in winning Saku over to her side. Whispered conferences between the three soon became the order of the day and Aunt Tholasi quickly perceived what was in the wind. Then for the first time since she came to Benares, she regretted having brought Girija Bai with her.

"It is like my foolishness to have brought this woman," she thought, "Vaman had a surer instinct, but I pleaded for her. She is a meddling, mischief-making busybody. I do not know into what pit of disaster she is waiting to land us. How I wish Gopinath were here!"

Doubts and fears assailed her; she played with the idea of sending for Gopinath and then gave it up; the tangle which she had vaguely heard that Sakaram and Lalita the dancing woman were making for themselves necessitated Gopinath's presence at home; and her only relief was in prayers addressed to Mother Ganga and the goddess Visalakshi to keep her nephew and his little ones from harm. There was a growing coolness in her manner towards Girija Bai; this, however, Girija Bai pretended not to notice.

One day, after visting Visweshwar's, they went to the temple of Kali at the other end of the city. There

they were met by Vageesam Pillai, that ubiquitous fellow passenger from Madras, who told them that Kadirvelu Swami was there, engaged in intensive meditation and worship of the dread goddess. The penance—for such said Vageesam it was—involved a protracted fast and the Swami was now in the middle of it. Girija Bai was possessed with an invincible desire to see him and even Tholasi Bai allowed her curiosity to get the better of her instinctive discretion. Vageesam Pillai conducted them to a long, low-ceilinged room, into which the sunlight struggled feebly through a skylight placed above; here the Swami was seen seated on a raised platform, very convincingly absorbed in meditation. He seemed totally unaware of their presence and his visitors waited patiently for him to come to, which Vageesam Pillai informed them, in a whisper, he would presently do; he had gone into a trance early in the morning and it was already time for him to revive.

"What does he do after coming to?" asked Girija Bai.

"Sometimes he calls for a cup of water, sometimes he doesn't. He does not quit his seat till the sun goes down, and then he rises for his bath."

"Then when does he offer *puja* to the Kali?"

A smile overspread Vageesam Pillai's face. He was going to make their flesh creep.

"At dead of night. When the voice of Nature is hushed, when the whole world is locked in sleep, and the stillness of the night air is disturbed only by the hooting of owls and the howling of jackals, then, in that dread hour which divides one half of the night

from the other, the Swami proceeds to the shrine of the goddess and offers *puja.* Oh! you must see it to believe it. It is not the devotional exercise of the average devotee. It is a meeting of mother and son. The goddess appears before him and while the Swami begs, the goddess blesses him with her unbounded gifts of love."

Girija Bai, lost in wonder at the facile intercourse which a mere man had been able to establish with an all-powerful goddess, turned with a look of admiration towards Vaman and Saku who seemed equally impressed.

At this moment the Swami recovered from his trance and looked vacantly in the direction of the visitors. Vageesam Pillai moved softly forward and, in a low, deferential voice, told him that the Kedaram people had come to pay their respects. The Swami nodded as much as to say that he was aware of it and did not require to be told.

He then motioned his visitors to be seated. Vageesam Pillai stood ready with a tumbler of Ganges water in his hand and the Swami indicated by a shake of his hooded head, that he did not want it. After a pause he said to nobody in particular:

"The big lady has never before been to see me."

There was an accent of welcome mingled with friendly reproof at Tholasi Bai's delayed visit. Girija Bai took it upon herself to answer.

"The big lady is old and by the time we return home after our morning rounds, she is quite exhausted. You know she does not take anything in the morning."

Aunt Tholasi felt that she should say something

nice, at least as some return for the courtesy with which the Swami was referring to her.

"I have long been wanting to come," she said. "My nephew and Girija Bai often used to talk about the Swami." The use of the third person was a customary courtesy and Aunt Tholasi Bai conceded it.

"There is nothing in personal meetings on the spiritual plane," said the Swami. "Mind witnesseth mind. The one essential aim is to search out the path to *moksha* and patiently pursue it. To those who seek such deliverance from the bondage of the flesh, it makes no difference whether meetings in the flesh take place or not."

"That is quite true," meekly seconded Vageesam Pillai.

But the subtle compliments had no effect in penetrating the armour of Aunt Tholasi's reserve. The Swami tried another track.

"How is the Royar's child getting on?" he asked, meaning Ambu.

This time he had touched the right chord and Aunt Tholasi's face brightened up.

"I think she is a great deal better. The doctor at Madras was not able to do much. Since coming here, her health has markedly improved. For one thing, she eats heartily and sleeps soundly. I am relying on Goddess Visalakshi and Mother Ganga to complete the cure."

"Quite right," assented the Swami. "What exactly is the matter with her?"

"It is more than I can tell," replied Aunt Tholasi. "She is not able to talk clearly. The doctor says it is

some defect in a gland near the neck. Sometimes she understands what one says, at others she doesn't."

"Does she squint?" asked the Swami, seemingly diagnosing the absent patient's disease.

"She does," answered Girija Bai, surprised at his perception.

The Swami reflected for a few minutes and then said:

"The child's ailment does not proceed from physical causes. It flows from the wrath of an offended deity. Expiation must be made before a cure can be effected."

"That is what the astrologers say," agreed Aunt Tholasi. "We have been advised to feed a thousand Brahmins on the banks of the Ganges. Nilakanta Dikshitar, at the Vasudeva Mutt, says the *Bhagavatha Purana* may be read for a fortnight at the end of which the feeding may follow."

Girija Bai was disappointed at Aunt Tholasi's obtuseness. Here was a first-rate spiritualist ready to take the child's treatment in hand but the old woman would not take the hint so openly given. But the Swami was pleased to approve.

"A capital idea. Nilakanta Dikshitar is a most devout Brahmin whose piety is equalled only by his learning. There are very few like him in these degenerate days. To hear the *Bhagavatha Purana* read and explained by him will certainly produce great merit"

He added that if the proposed readings could begin a week from that day he would, by their leave, come and listen and share the spiritual benefits. Aunt Tholasi, in whose estimation the Swami was rising

every minute, replied that nothing would give her greater pleasure and added the complimentary remark that the presence of so developed a *yogi* would be a further guarantee of divine favour. And so, with mutual compliments, they took leave of one another.

On the Wednesday following, in the spacious shed adjoining the mutt, in the sight of the sacred river, after libations offered to the declining sun, Nilakanta Dikshitar began his reading and exposition of the sacred *Purana* which was intended to be spread over the ensuing fortnight. It was the story of creation and of the several incarnations of Vishnu in the cause of suffering humanity. All the Tamil residents of Benares flocked to hear the readings every evening with the simple fervour of understanding faith. The gentle Nilakanta Dikshit had a wondrous gift of speech. His explanations were simple and went home. Rarely, if ever, did he speak above the heads of his audience and he had the remarkable gift of relating the story to the facts of every-day life and thus delivering a message of hope and consolation to his hearers.

Kadirvelu Swami kept his word and made it a point of being present at these discourses every evening. He would arrive attended by Vageesam Pillai and listen with every sign of reverence, indicating by occasional nods his respectful agreement with the point which Nilakanta was making. Nilakanta Dikshit always received the Swami courteously for, to his unsuspecting mind, the manifestation of devotion was a sufficient passport to his regard. Aunt Tholasi Bai also noticed the reverent interest unflaggingly displayed by the Swami and found herself warming to him more and

more. In her own mind, she concluded that her original hostility must have been due to Girija Bai, who, by constituting herself the Swami's advocate, gave him an unfortunate handicap. Before the last reading she had definitely gone over to his side and Vaman and Girija Bai had no doubt in their minds that the ice had been broken.

Arrangements were next taken in hand for the large scale feeding which had been resolved upon. Kadirvelu Swami very graciously helped with advice and suggestion and also with the services of his Man Friday, Vageesam Pillai. The *Desastha* Brahmins always did their guests well and Aunt Tholasi Bai, with her Athawar upbringing, excelled herself and provided her guests with the richest repast which money could obtain. More than the budgeted thousand sat for the meal. After the Brahmins had feasted the poor were fed. In that sacred city, caste often took a back seat and scores of persons who were not twice-born also shared in the good cheer.

As the last leaves were taken away, the westering sun went down in a blaze of gold. Though tired and exhausted, Tholasi Bai felt a great peace stealing over her. It was to her the completion of a lifework, the realisation of a lifetime's dream. She took Ambu in her arms and, strangely enough, the girl did not kick or squeal, but surrendered herself to '*athya*' eagerly. With a silent blessing and prayer the old lady handed her back to her mother. Saku's eyes glistened and she stammered her gratitude to Aunt Tholasi. And Aunt Tholasi's generous emotions welled up within her and she burst into tears of hope and gratitude.

CHAPTER XV.

When the expiatory ceremonies were concluded, Aunt Tholasi was utterly prostrated; only her amazing power of will had enabled her to supervise the long-drawn ceremonies which lasted from morning till night for the best part of three weeks. Despite her weak and exhausted condition she adhered to the prescribed routine, with the result that she caught a chill, which soon developed into a high fever. Vaman and Saku were alarmed, for such was the pertinacity of the old lady that she not only refused to take any medicine but would not permit herself even the slightest relaxation from the day's routine with its recurring baths and visits to temples. The only concession which she agreed to make to the claims of the flesh was to bathe in warm water. It went very much against the grain for her to forego the ceremonial dip in the Ganges; still, out of consideration for Vaman's piteous appeals, she stretched a point and bathed in water which Saku daily brought from the river and warmed at home.

A week elapsed and still the fever showed no signs of abating; Aunt Tholasi's weakness increased and Vaman and his wife were seriously alarmed; yet, when Vaman wanted to call in a doctor, she declined to have anything to do with a medical man. The entreaties of Vaman and his wife, reinforced by Girija Bai's, were unavailing. Aunt Tholasi could even afford to be light-hearted; she said, in a feeble voice, while the shadow of a smile flickered over her face:

"If I am to die, Vaman, let me die without the intervention of a doctor."

Vaman, never a humorist, protested: "How can you talk of dying, *athya?* And what will Gopinath say if I brought you here and allowed you to die?"

"He ought to be glad, Vaman, and you must consider yourself thrice blessed to have the opportunity of cremating me and performing my obsequies here. It is not given to everybody to die at Kashi."

"I won't hear of your dying, *athya*," moaned Vaman, the tears starting to his eyes. "What shall we do when you are gone?"

"Don't be silly, Vaman," said Aunt Tholasi, chidingly. "You must be a good nephew and pray to all our family gods that I may die at Benares and attain salvation."

But Vaman would not hear. Aunt Tholasi's hopes of salvation meant little to him. It was to him nothing more than the jargon of priest-ridden folks who had an unreasoning notion that death was the solver of all ills. Vaman himself clung to life tenaciously and death, to him, appeared to be the door which opened on to a Chamber of Horrors, where the wicked were roasted in hell-fire: and, though Vaman would have been the last person in the world to charge himself with breaking God's law, yet he subconsciously felt that he had not conformed to pious codes and that his exit from life might be the beginning of unknown terrors. As for Aunt Tholasi, ever since her husband's death, she had lived only for the end and had been preparing herself, by the aid of such light as was afforded to her, to meet her Maker. To her it did not matter when

she died; "a day, less or more" made no difference; but it did mean everything to her that she should die at Kashi.

Vaman's only resource now was his friend the holy man, and to Munda Kadirvelu Swami he went and begged him to intervene.

The very next day, the Swami called at the Vasudeva Mutt, attended by Vageesam Pillai. Aunt Tholasi had just returned from the Visweshwar temple where she had been carried for morning worship in a *tonga*. She sat in a corner on a rattan mat, muffled up to her ears in a fawn-coloured shawl of coarse silk. The Swami approached her on tiptoe, his manner almost purring. In the softest of voices, which revealed the utmost concern, he asked in the bedside manner of a family doctor:

"How are we, to-day? It was only yesterday that the Swami heard that the big lady was ill."

Aunt Tholasi shifted in her seat and made movements of gratification at the Swami's consideration in visiting her.

"Let the Swami be seated. Vaman, please fetch a plank for the Swami to sit on."

There was a cold draught and Aunt Tholasi shivered. Saku Bai ran up to her and adjusted her shawl round her shoulders and chest. The Swami, turning towards Vaman, asked him how long Aunt Tholasi had been ill and appeared hurt at not having been told earlier. And, before Vaman could answer, Girija Bai struck in volubly and gave a detailed account of the origin and course of the fever.

"She won't take any medicine," she fussed. "How

can a woman of her age stand all this strain? I told her at the time she was exerting herself far too much, but she wouldn't listen. And now she refuses to see a doctor."

Aunt Tholasi shook her head deprecatingly. She was going to reply, but the Swami interposed with:

"What good can a doctor do? He may give her some coloured water from the dispensary made up of God alone knows what. How can one expect the big lady to swallow all that stuff at her time of life?"

Aunt Tholasi threw a grateful look at the Swami.

"Do you hear what the Swami says, Vaman?" she asked.

Vaman, who did not like the turn which things were taking and could not understand the Swami's line, raised his eyes pleadingly to the Swami.

"Do not be anxious, Vaman Rao" said the Swami, soothingly. "The big lady has lived a good life and she will yet recover."

It was now Aunt Tholasi's turn to protest.

"The Swami must not say so. What have I to live for? I am nearly seventy and it is time that I die. What better luck can I hope for than to lay my bones at Kashi."

Vaman said, with emotion: "Why should she die at all?"

Then, seeing a smile hover over the faces of those present. "I mean, where is the hurry? She may easily live to be a hundred. What are we to do if she should die and leave us orphaned? She has been father, mother and aunt to us."

A silence ensued. It was broken by the Swami, who called for a silk cloth. They at once saw that the Swami was going to feel Aunt Tholasi's pulse. Saku Bai brought a silk handkerchief which was intended to obviate the impurity of direct contact between a lady and a man not of her own family; the Swami threw it over Tholasi Bai's hand and felt her pulse. After a few moments, he said:

"Pulse action is very weak. I note the dominance of bile." He handed the silk handkerchief back to Saku and continued in deliberate tones: "We are in God's hands. Let us not consciously dissipate life. The Swami will send the lady a few packets of medicated powder, a harmless concoction. The big lady must be familiar with it. It is made of the essence of the *nim* bark, dried ginger and *chireta.*" And, before Aunt Tholasi could say anything, he turned to Vaman and said:

"Let not the Raoji lose heart. It is best always to adopt a philosophical attitude. To take precautions is the mark of the wise. Send urgently for the brothers at home."

"Why not send a wire?" suggested Girija Bai, ever ready with plans and suggestions.

"That may be done," said the Swami, drily.

For the first time since the commencement of the fever, Aunt Tholasi allowed a note of anxiety to creep into her voice. A sight of her dear nephews and their wives seemed near at hand and it was a bait that tempted her as nothing else on earth could do.

"I suppose nothing will happen before they come from Kedaram?" she asked timidly.

"Let the big lady have no fears on any score. The Swami will see that all things turn out well."

In the course of the day, Vaman called at the Swami's lodgings, accompanied by Girija Bai. He was full of concern for his aunt's health and wished to ascertain from him what he really thought of her condition. Girija Bai successfully affected a concern which she did not feel.

"What is your birth star?" asked Swami.

"Swati".

"What was the constellation under which you were born?"

"Scorpio".

The Swami reflected for a while making certain calculations on his fingers. He then said:

"Saturn is commencing his seven-and-a-half-year rule. A difficult time is indicated. Propitiatory as well as expiatory ceremonies are called for." And he proceeded to enforce his point with impressive citations from Tamil works on astrology, Vageesam Pillai nodding his head in respectful admiration at the Swami's clear exposition of the divine will, his face full of concern for all the ill that was foreboded for Vaman. Vaman, needless to say, did not understand a word of the affrighting jargon; but he definitely was able to gather that unprecedented difficulties in the way of death, disease and debt were about to face him and his family. His tongue clove to the roof of his mouth and he opened his eyes in horror.

Girija Bai inquired if nothing could be done to stem the force of destiny.

"Everything can be done," said the Swami with a

most confident air. "The Powers above should be placated. If you win divine favour, nothing will be impossible. And, to the cry of the true devotee, God responds as to no other." And he cited that Tamil verse which is almost word for word a translation of the line "More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of."

"And what is it that should be done?" pursued Girija Bai.

The Swami assumed the air of an expert who is bored by lay attempts to understand matters of a highly technical nature.

"It is difficult to express. *Pujas* must be performed."

"What *puja?* I am asking only out of ignorance, said Girija Bai, apologetically.

The Swami looked at the ceiling for a moment and then said: *"Shakti Puja"*.

Girija Bai looked puzzled, and lifted her eyebrows interrogatively.

"What is the good of discussing?" asked the Swami. "It is an elaborate ritual, calculated to win the favour of the Creative Mother, the source of all creative activity. If the *puja* is performed with devotion and purity of heart, there is no desire of man which cannot be achieved; no difficulty which cannot be removed; no position that cannot be attained."

The discussion was continued for some time, with eager questioning on one side and impressive, though hardly intelligible, answers on the other. The result was that Vaman, who, between his fears for his aunt's health and the impending disasters foreshadowed by

the Swami, was now thoroughly demoralised, agreed to the *puja* being performed by the Swami in his name. Kadirvelu Swami, out of consideration for the Athawar family in general and Vaman Janardhan in particular, undertook to keep the expenses at a minimum. The ceremony was expected to last for forty-five days and, ordinarily, the expenses would run to thousands of rupees. (Vaman's gasp at this point was pitiful in the extreme.) But the Swami with a reassuring smile said that such figures were for Maharajas and Zemindars and promised, in the present case, to finish the whole business for a trifling sum (whose extent, however, he discreetly omitted to mention and which Vaman was too frightened to inquire) and asked Vaman to find a couple of hundred rupees for the time being. And he succeeded in conveying to his bewildered *protege* the impression that two hundred was the figure within the neighbourhood of which the whole ceremony could be completed.

"Above all things, not a word to the big lady of what we propose to do. She is so selfless, so anxious to secure release from life and re-birth, that she is sure to set her face against it."

"Of course not," agreed Girija Bai.

"As for the trifle you will have to deposit now, depend upon it, Vaman Rao, it will come back to you a hundredfold, before you are a few months older."

"Will it cover the case of the buried treasure as well?" asked Girija Bai, tremulously.

The Swami permitted himself the luxury of a laugh, and Girija Bai blushed to the roots of her shaven hair.

"Buried treasure, indeed!" he said. "What is the

mighty river Ganges to a thimbleful of water? That would be about the proportion which the treasures Vaman Rao will lay for himself in heaven by this *puja* will bear to the expenses involved. And, on earth, he will be wealthy beyond the dreams of avarice."

Before Vaman and Girija Bai took their departure, Vaman promised to bring a couple of hundred rupees before nightfall so that the Swami could commence the proceedings without delay. As Vaman left, the Swami called over his shoulder and said, with the air of one who had been considering the matter.

"I shouldn't send that wire to Kedaram. There is really no urgency and your brothers will get a needless fright. A hint in a letter will quite do for the present."

CHAPTER XVI.

At Kedaram, clouds began to gather round Athawar House. The absence of Vaman and Aunt Tholasi led to an automatic relaxation of the household discipline. Gopinath, the most easy-going of men, held the reins but lightly; Raghunath lost himself in fits of abstraction over political and theosophical problems.

Sakaram, relieved from the piercing scrutiny of Vaman's watchful eyes, had been making the utmost use of his freedom; the pilgrims had not been away many weeks when Sakaram developed into a family problem. His affair with Lalita was assuming proportions which it was impossible to ignore. For a time, indeed, the Athawars slurred over the matter, suppressing references to it and trying to appear unconcerned; but the pretence could not be kept up for ever; the effort to endure what seemed incurable was itself a trial. To add to their troubles, Sakaram's wife, Kamakshi Bai, arrived at Athawar House and duly proceeded to make herself and the rest of the family miserable. She proclaimed her wrongs from the house tops and shrieked to the world to bear witness to her shames. The Athawars were sensitive in the extreme, but Kamakshi Bai thought nothing of it and drove a chaise and four through their sensitive pride, threatening volubly, lamenting volubly. All her Boadicean excess of lamentation struck an occasional note of sympathy in the Athawars who felt that she was a very much wronged woman indeed. Gopinath had tried to talk to

Sakaram but had found the effort of moralising too much for him. Raghunath shrank from the open expression of matters which he believed were scarcely fit for open discussion. Anantarama Aiyar had tackled Sakaram and ended by making a bungle of it; he was too unworldly and too obviously embarrassed when talking of passion to be of any use. In every way the position was very complicated and the Athawars were acutely distressed.

Sakaram, indeed, seemed to be drifting away from home and family; ever since his wife returned and started her ceaseless tornado drives, he had virtually made Lalita's house his home, coming to Athawar House only at meal times. Lalita was fast coming into fashion; her art was acclaimed as a fascinating blend of the old and modern styles; her dancing was pleasing to see; so was she; a unique combination of personal and professional charm kept her very much to the fore. It was a wonder to many how she was content to be Sakaram's mistress. Lalita had been dedicated to the gods of the Hindu pantheon and by all the laws of her profession her body should have been at the disposal of the highest bidder; the mutual attraction, therefore, of Lalita and Sakaram and their insane devotion to each other was incomprehensible.

Sakaram, on his side, had difficulties to contend with. In his case, the dragon which guarded the castle manifested itself long after he had gained the affections of the fairy princess. This was Gunavati, Lalita's foster-mother, a massive woman long past the middle age. When Sakaram at first came on the scene she had been greatly pleased; an Athawar smitten with the charms

of her foster-daughter was in the nature of an advertisement. Lalita had just made her *debut* and Sakaram, hanging to the skirts of her petticoat, was a first-rate catch and Gunavati made the most of it. His personal charms had no meaning to her; she rather thought of the money bags which, she made no doubt, were ready to be laid at Lalita's feet. Lalita, on the other hand, was attracted by the man himself, his rare beauty of person and delicacy of feature; his masterly playing on the *vina;* while she had been struck by the chivalrous consideration he always showed her. She was never happy except when he was by her side; loving and tender, they could not have been more securely linked with each other had they been married before priests and sacrificial fires. As a girl she had been pert, but since Sakaram came into the field, she had grown almost staid. Already she was tired of men and their appetites; she hated the way in which they strode up to her house, settled terms with her foster-mother and came up to her boldly demanding her embraces. It was galling to her to sell herself in this wise and yet, such was the hold of custom that she yielded herself listlessly to old and young alike. Gunavati had a severe conception of the duties of a dancing-girl; a dancing-girl had no right to pick and choose; she must accept what came along so long as the arrival was made to the tune of money in both hands. Money was the prime consideration and she wanted Lalita to make all she could of it by employing all the arts of her trade. Lalita was anything but apt at these tricks and could never achieve the simpering affectation of regard for her customers which Gunavati tried to instil into her as the

first requirement of a dancing-girl. Lalita did not conceal her abhorrence of the pot-bellied *Kangani,* old enough to be her father, whom Gunavati, with a calculating eye cocked at his bank balance, introduced to her for the enjoyment of her virgin favours; and this middle-aged rake would surely have knocked all the bloom out of a shocked and shivering Lalita long before her time had it not pleased a kindly God to call him to his account prematurely. He had been dead but a few weeks when Sakaram came on the scene and thoroughly enslaved Lalita's fancy. His music, lavishly appreciated no doubt, was but a pretext. It provided the occasion for meetings which innocent, at any rate on Sakaram's part, at first, soon acquired a tender quality. Sakaram was by instinct as honourable a man as ever breathed, but it was not until his subjugation was complete that he realised whither he had been tending. The discovery produced a mild shock; his squeamishness, however, wore off and he was asking himself what there was to be ashamed of; it all seemed so natural and called for no remorse or self-pity. His visits to her house, at first made shyly and with a discreet choice of hour, fast became open and easy. Every evening, at lamp-lighting time, as the temple bells pealed at Kedareswar's, Sakaram called at Lalita's and gave himself up to bouts of music which were kept up till a late hour. Crowds of eager listeners used to gather on Lalita's verandah and block up the passage, to hear the 'Athawar Rayar' make music with Gunavati's daughter. It was not until their delighted appreciation of the music so produced had received adequate expression that they adverted to the questionable

relationship which was springing up between the performers.

As time went on, things changed. Lalita, professionally speaking, was on the crest of the wave and was coming to be the most talked-about dancer south of Madras. The returns of her profession brought delighted grins to Gunavati's face. But Gunavati was not satisfied; to her enough could never be a feast; not to get all that could possibly be got was as bad as starving. Sakaram was not a paying proposition; he was worse, he prevented profits; Lalita, inextricably caught in his coils, refused to look at others inclined to pay their way handsomely. It would have been something if Sakaram paid for his pleasures, at least at concession rates; but that he would not and, on the other hand, he seemed to exercise proprietary rights over Lalita. At first, Sakaram had been free with his gifts, artistic jewellery, which Lalita cherished as her dearest possessions. Once he gave her a beautiful emerald ring which old Goswami Punt had given to Sakaram's mother when he brought her home after the wedding. It had been in the family from time out of mind and was the most charming gift he could have given to the woman he loved. Later, he gave her a sapphire necklace which had been worn successively by the leading Athawar ladies, having been a treasured gift from one of the earlier queens of Tanjore, but thereafter his gifts ceased except for occasional trinkets of small value. Gunavati fumed and openly remonstrated with Sakaram for blocking up her daughter's business; but Sakaram paid no heed to the old harridan's hints, nor for that matter did Lalita, with the result that Gunavati

went into orgies of rage which tore up the household. Thus, while the world talked and Gunavati raged, the course of Sakaram's and Lalita's love ran on leaping unconcernedly over the crags and boulders which strewed its path.

The worst of such irregular relationships is their liability to abrupt terminations; their tenure is uncertain and attempts to oust the man in possession quite common. A new enemy appeared on the horizon determined to obtain possession of Lalita at all costs. He came in force, certain in his own mind that the impecunious Athawar would have to flee before him in disorder. The Zamindar of Sendil had for some time past been casting his eyes on Lalita but he had delayed his approaches as he was short of funds. The Zamindari was a bleak bit of territory which yielded very little and the best parts of it were already mortgaged up to the hilt. But Atmaram Sait was ready at hand to help with funds and incidentally to tighten the hold which he already had. It was at Atmaram's house, at a party which he gave in connection with his grandson's first birthday, that the Zamindar met Lalita at close quarters and lost his head completely over her. Atmaram Sait noticed the direction of the wind and craftily laid his plans. He smelt a profitable side-line opening up before him: all that was needed was to bring the Zamindar into touch with the dancing-girl and lend him the required money, taking care to make out the documents for a larger sum. With Atmaram, to decide was to act. He persuaded an all-too-willing Zamindar to give a party in his house and even devised the occasion. The President of the District Board of Kedaram had

been made a Dewan Bahadur in the Birthday Honours and a party of congratulation was due to him, if not from Atmaram, at least as a result of his efforts. Atmaram stood to gain by keeping in with the President and incidentally he would be doing a good turn to Gunavati, who was an old flame of his and he calculated that she might even reward him with the company of Lalita herself. The crafty moneylender loved to have his fling if he could have it gratis; but his main aim was the pleasure he would give to the new Dewan Bahadur who was a power in the land and worth cultivating; he could give contracts galore and there was not a soul in the District who could make more out of a contract than Atmaram Sait.

The Zamindar's party came off and was voted an unqualified success. All Kedaram was there with its wife and the Zamindar was pinched for months afterwards though he was the type that tries to save itself trouble by not thinking of it. The brightest part of the evening's show was Lalita's dancing; while the audience acclaimed, the Zamindar sat counting the minutes till the entertainment should reach its end and he could have his heart's desire. In his own mind he had no doubt that the dancing-girl would be delighted to win his favour. But he was reckoning without his host. Lalita had been made aware of his plans for the evening. She was to spend the night with the Zamindar who was known to be a princely giver even though he had to borrow heavily to keep up his reputation. Lalita listened to Gunavati's plans and made no answer; she was busy making her own. Sendil, thought Lalita, was the

limit; getting on for forty, he was a grossly-built man with a bull neck, from which his oily face rose like a dome showing a pair of cat-like eyes which repelled her. His skinny moustache was trained upward to expose a cruel mouth. Lalita could not stomach the idea of the Zamindar and fled with tears in her eyes to Sakaram for relief.

"Cut it, Lalita," he said bravely. "It is time you took a strong line."

"Oh! that I could leave all this behind and get away somewhere from the sight and sound of these people!" she sobbed, while Sakaram caught her in his arms and brushed her hair aside from her wet cheeks.

"I am sure it will come to that, my dear," comforted Sakaram.

They had discussed it scores of times before but they knew that neither of them had really the grit to cut the painter; they were too deeply rooted in the decencies of life to think of running away from it. Lalita's sense of obligation to her foster-mother was profound; ingratitude, she had been taught, was a cardinal sin. An Athawar running away with a dancing-girl would be the darkest smudge on an escutcheon so far undimmed. But an hour comes when painters must be cut and roots torn up regardless; this time Lalita and Sakaram determined to act decisively.

"All our ideas of running away are unworkable," said Sakaram. "We have talked about it times without number, but when it comes to action both of us get into a funk. Let us stay here and face the enemy."

"Oh! my mother is sure to raise hell if I do not agree. She will wait till the performance is over and

actually bundle me into the Zamindar's arms. Far better would it be if she threw me into a wall instead."

"Let me see her doing it," said Sakaram, very calm and collected. "Look, Lalita. I shall tell you what you should do. I shall have a motor car in readiness outside the Zamindar's palace at night. As soon as the entertainment is over, you just come out, get into the car and we shall drive home straight. Let the Zamindar come after you if he likes."

Lalita bit her lip. "He is sure to come or, if he doesn't, my mother will insist on my going back. She is in league with that limb of Satan, Atmaram Sait."

"Let them come. If they do, straight into Athawar House you go, let the world say what it likes. We shall make a fight for it if it comes to that."

Lalita had her own doubts whether Sakaram would stick to his plan when it came to action; she feared he would wobble, but it gave her a delicious feeling to hear him talk like that, and though her fears persisted, she found comfort in thinking of what Sakaram had said. There was moreover a certain decision in the set of his chin that made her hope that the seemingly inert Sakaram might take his courage in his hands and take her into Athawar House and make a dash for it after all.

Sakaram kept his word and followed the plan agreed upon. When Lalita's performance was over she received the congratulations of Atmaram Sait who spoke for the Zamindar, received her fees gracefully and dutifully handed them to her foster-mother. The Zamindar, making a supreme effort, uttered in a low voice an invitation to Lalita to spend the night at the palace

and leave early the next day—saying that all arrangements for her comfort had been made. Lalita smiled dubiously, a smile which the Sait as well as the Zamindar interpreted as a shy expression of consent. Gunavati thought so too, though she was wild at the lack of enthusiasm which, according to the rules of the profession, a desired dancing-girl should have manifested. That was the worst of her, thought Gunavati; she behaved like a family woman, with her simpering coyness. Thank Heaven, however, all this nonsense could not last for long now. The Zamindar had come on the scene; a big man with a long purse, and Lalita was sure to take to him. To Gunavati's eyes the Zamindar seemed Apollo.

Lalita slipped away unobserved to the waiting car outside, leaving word through an attendant that she had left for Kedaram. Unmindful even of the presence of the driver, she threw herself into the arms of Sakaram and did not leave them till they reached Kedaram. It was a lovely night, the moon sailing overhead in a lavender sky. The car sped along a winding ribbon of road, relieved by lengths of green paddy fields intersected by dense plantations of sugarcane. The silence was broken now and then by the howl of a scampering jackal; by an occasional human voice and by the distant rattle of village drums. But Sakaram had no ear for these sounds of the Indian night. From out of his dim memories of Shakespeare a few lines shuttled to and fro in his head:

> "In such a night did Jessica steal from the wealthy Jew
> And, with an unthrift love, did run from Venice

As far as Belmont."

Where Belmont was, Sakaram had little idea; but Kedaram would serve.

Gunavati arrived home next day and went into fits of uncontrollable rage. For the first time in her life, Lalita stood up to her foster-mother and told her roundly that she proposed to deal with her life as she pleased. Dazed and dumbfounded, Gunavati beat her breasts and tore her hair in the true manner of the much wronged woman. Then she subsided into a silence as profound as her earlier indignation had been wild.

But they would not allow Lalita to rest in peace. Caste vanity had been wounded; the rest of her race railed at Lalita for kicking over the traces. "To turn her nose up at a live Zamindar! Such a thing had not been heard of before!" declared the dancing-girls of Kedaram.

To purchase peace Sakaram renewed his gifts to Lalita. He gave her a costly diamond necklace which, by rights, belonged to his sister. Some time afterwards, he raised a loan from Atmaram Sait on the pledge of a pair of diamond earrings, and handed the money to Lalita. Lalita who knew how pinched the Athawars were for money, quickly guessed that Sakaram must have made an indiscreet bargain and succeeded in extracting from him the source of the money. She went forthwith and brought the money and, handing the identical notes to him, bade him go and return the money to the Sait forthwith.

Sakaram's protests were unavailing.

"Please do as I tell you," she said, her words almost

a command, the first which she had ever uttered to the adoring Sakaram. And the urge of the command was intensified by the mute appeal in Lalita's glistening eyes.

Gunavati heard and raged like a caged lioness; the Athawars heard and resigned themselves to fate.

CHAPTER XVII.

At Benares a week elapsed and yet there were no signs of improvement in Aunt Tholasi's health. The fever was coursing up and down and she was extremely weak. Not a day passed without her asking whether there was any news from Kedaram. Believing that Vaman had sent a telegram to his brothers at home, she found the absence of any reply inexplicable; but with native charity, she concluded that Gopinath must be unusually busy not to acknowledge receipt of Vaman's wire.

The Swami, who was a daily visitor, now reassured her on the point, and Aunt Tholasi found herself relying quite a good deal on the holy man who, for the first time during her long stay at Benares, had been admitted to her confidence. Persuaded that her end was near, she was now bent upon making a will and had raised the question with the Swami. Aunt Tholasi's original intention had been to divide her property equally among the Athawar brothers and to make some kind of provision for Susila. Latterly, she had wavered in her resolve and was thinking of giving a larger share to Vaman, whose circumstances seemed to justify such preferential treatment. Vaman, she felt, could not make much headway in the world and his responsibilities were just beginning—the education of his boys, Ambu's treatment and cure and then her marriage. Taking all things into account—and the Swami had helped in the reckoning

unnoticed—Aunt Tholasi had decided that it would be best to leave Vaman the larger part of her property. Now the Swami went one better and suggested that the entire property should be left to Vaman. He put the case for Vaman very plausibly indeed. Gopinath had no care on earth, his daughters were comfortably married; Raghunath was quite well off, he had an only daughter and his wife had money of her own. Sakaram had disgraced himself; in any case, he was still young and could make his way in the world and moreover he would—or should—get a share of his mother's jewels.

"The great point is to keep the property in the family and not to allow it to find its way into the hands of strangers and dancing-girls," said the Swami.

Aunt Tholasi stood loyally by her slandered nephew.

"There is no danger from any dancing-girl. The Athawars are not made that way."

The Swami smiled tolerantly and said:

"Let us hope so. The big lady has lived a sheltered life and has no experience of crafty people. Anyway, it is essential the property should be conserved and Vaman Rao is about the safest person who can be entrusted with its care. And, I suppose, it is fairly clear by now that the family will be carried on only by his children," he reminded her.

"I think so," agreed Aunt Tholasi. "I do not think either Gopinath or Raghunath is going to have more children. Unless it be Sakaram . . . "

"Let us proceed on existing facts. Supposing any money is left to Gopinath Punt, who will get it ultimately?"

Aunt Tholasi vaguely said the family would get it.

"But who will constitute the family?" And, after waiting for a second or two he continued, "Only Vaman Rao's children. And, who knows, Gopinath Punt is certain to take one of Vaman Rao's children in adoption. So it is all one whether you provide for a division of the properties or bequeath them to Vaman. And Vaman will be sure to keep the property intact; and that is more than you can say of the others."

Aunt Tholasi found herself agreeing with the Swami. She was satisfied that she would not be acting unfairly if she left all her properties to her "unpractical nephew" Vaman.

The very next day a lawyer was brought and a will was drafted, bequeathing all Aunt Tholasi's properties to Vaman Janardhan, subject to the condition that her jewels should be divided equally between Sakaram and Susila and that Vaman should make presents to Gopinath's daughters and to Sona of the value of twenty-five rupees each at the time of *Pongal* every year. She insisted also on the feeding of six persons each *Dwadasi,* the twelfth day after the New and Full Moons. A few other minor bequests were made and Aunt Tholasi duly appended her signature in the presence of Nilakanta Dikshitar who was called in to attest the document. The Swami was requested to sign as a witness but he easily got out of it.

"The lady should leave me alone. What concern has this body with the affairs of the world? Because the lady was ill and sought this body's advice, this body gave it. It is best that the Swami's connection with this business ceases now." And presently the indispensable

Swami rounded off his kindness by bringing the Sub-Registrar to the *mutt* where the will was duly registered.

Meanwhile, the *puja* had been started by the Swami and was proceeding apace; and Vaman found himself paying for it on a scale for which he had not bargained. He was moody in consequence, and nothing that Girija Bai could say to comfort and reassure him had any effect in reviving his drooping spirits. There had been some feeding of the poor on the tenth day and Vaman had come to the Swami's lodgings accompanied by Girija Bai in the afternoon. The Swami gave them sacred ashes to wear on their foreheads and asked them about the state of Aunt Tholasi's health.

"Same as ever," said Vaman, his moodiness increasing at the thought. "Already we have spent a lot of money and the position remains unchanged."

Girija Bai did not like Vaman's fault-finding tone and was vexed at the discourtesy in his manner. She said, in accents of reproof:

"You are a fine man, indeed! The *puja* has just begun and already you want results. You are like the barren woman who goes round the *peepul* tree, praying for children and feeling herself for signs of motherhood at the end of the first round."

Thus encouraged, Vaman said grudgingly:

"I know I am somewhat hasty. Nobody knows better than the Swami that my present circumstances are anything but easy and it is natural that I should occasionally feel some doubts whether all this expense is called for."

"You are a most simple-minded person, Vaman Rao. You won't see what lies in front of you. Benefits have

already flowed from the *puja* and yet you will shut your eyes to them."

"Benefits!" exclaimed Vaman, perplexed.

"You are already a rich man, Vaman Rao, and yet you won't stop whining, excuse my saying it. Well, let us see, how much are your aunt's properties worth?"

"She has three *velis* of land at Syamalapuri, worth at least twenty thousand rupees and a house at Kedaram, worth five thousand."

"How much has she in cash?"

"Five thousand in the Co-operative Bank."

"And jewels?"

"That's a trifle. A necklace of sovereigns, diamond ear pendants and a sapphire necklace and a few trinkets besides. The whole lot will not be worth more than five thousand."

"On a modest calculation, is your aunt worth thirty-five thousand rupees or is she not?" asked the Swami, his manner that of an advocate who knows the effect he is producing.

"Well—yes, I suppose so," replied Vaman.

"And, by your aunt's will, you are the heir to all her properties, aren't you, Vaman Rao? Had you the ghost of a notion ten days ago that your aunt would bequeath her properties to you?"

"Of course not," admitted Vaman.

"Good. And how do you think this came about? Do you think that your respected aunt suddenly took it into her head in the seventy-first year of her life to leave you the sole heir of all her properties and not merely a sharer along with the rest as she has all along been thinking of doing?"

Vaman could make no answer.

"Does it strike you," continued the Swami with energy, "that the change in your aunt's intentions was effected only about a week ago—soon after we began the *puja?* Does the connection between the *puja* and the disposition of property made by your aunt now become apparent to you? Know, Vaman Rao, that the Great Devi has been more than ordinarily merciful and that the will just made by your aunt in your favour is but the first-fruits of the religious enterprise upon which you have embarked. Think of the past and of the present; ten days ago, black ruin stared you in the face and you were on the verge of insolvency; to-day you are richer by thirty-five thousand rupees. Blaspheme not, Vaman Rao, for doubt is blasphemy."

Had Vaman been awake he would have observed a curious look come into the Swami's three-cornered eyes, a look that said: "Is he ripe yet? Is he ripe?" Apparently the Swami answered himself in the affirmative for, as if he took a sudden resolution, he leaned forward and plunged into a long and intricate discourse on the underlying principle of *Shakti Puja,* wherein the Divine Mother was venerated. Its most effective method, he said, was to select a woman, proved to have risen above the temptations of the flesh and to have reached a high state of spiritual development. She must be worshipped, but the worshipper must be sufficiently evolved not to advert to the sex of the person to whom he was offering *puja.* The worshipper as well as the woman were to be in a state of perfect nudity and the amount of control which the worshipper had to achieve over his body was staggering; the slightest lapse in thought, the

smallest sign of sex-consciousness, and the consequences would be disastrous. It was like playing with fire; the risks were enormous; but if the *puja* should be performed with *niyama,* with strict adherence to rules, the beneficent effects would exceed the most extravagant hopes. The person in whose name the *puja* was performed would feel a strange power within him and would become capable of achieving anything he desired. The advantage would not be merely personal; it would cover the whole family, the generations that had gone before and generations yet to come. A great storehouse of divine energy would be secured which would inspire and influence the family at every turn.

Needless to say, Vaman could understand little of all this jargon. Impressed, however, he was. Already he seemed to draw from the great storehouse of power which the completed *puja* was to bring into existence. But he only said doubtfully, "A woman?"

The Swami waved aside his hesitations and said he would make it his business to secure a woman of the requisite fibre. In fact, he knew of one and she was at hand, here, in Benares, praying and worshipping at the shrine of Sri Visalakshi like a vestal virgin. Her charges would be very reasonable, said the Swami.

A fleeting doubt crossed Vaman's mind as to why an unworldly virgin who had reached a high state of spiritual development should make any charge for her spirituality at all; but he did not give expression to it. The Swami, who never allowed the grass to grow under his feet, turned swiftly to Vageesam Pillai and asked if he had seen Dhumrakshi Devi that

day. Vageesam Pillai, it appeared, had just met her going to the Kali temple.

"Then, would Vageesam ask her to step in for a moment, please?"

Vageesam Pillai went out and returned within a few minutes, leading a tall, well-built woman, dressed in a salmon-coloured *sari*. She wore no jewels, but carried a huge blob of saffron powder on her forehead and a single marigold in her hair. She stared vacantly with lustreless eyes; her movements were mechanical; her answers to the Swami, given with an absent air, were monosyllabic. Indeed, she seemed not to understand what was being said; it transpired that she had been fasting for three days, and the Swami's offer of milk and plantain fruits was declined affrightedly.

Vaman was struck dumb. He sat stock-still, not understanding the drift of it all, an intruder in a strange world. But in less than an hour he found himself agreeing to the employment of Dhumrakshi Devi to act as the substitute for the Divine Mother. As for her remuneration, the Swami whispered to an awe-struck Vaman that a trifle of a hundred rupees would do for the present. Vaman happened to have the amount in hand, having just received a remittance from Kedaram. His recent contributions to the Swami's spiritual exercises had depleted his finances seriously; and, unknown to Aunt Tholasi, he had written home for three hundred rupees. Vaman had called at the Post Office on his way and received the money, but the old Adam rose within him and counselled caution. He went out and, taking a hundred-rupee note from his pocket, returned to the Swami and laid it before him.

Simple Vaman! The hurried exit and return had not been lost on the Swami; it did not take him a minute to worm out the facts from Girija Bai. If the Swami chuckled, he gave no signs of it.

The *puja* proved a complicated process which neither Vaman nor Girija Bai strove to understand. Every day, on a raised pedestal, sat Dhumrakshi Devi, dressed in nothing save her skin, while the Swami, who was supposed to conduct the worship, worked behind closed doors. At the conclusion of the daily worship, the curtain was drawn aside for a moment and Vaman was admitted to a sight of the medium. She sat back in a veritable embankment of flowers which covered her legs, while over her bosom rested a couple of garlands, which did vague duty for a blouse. It did not at first dawn upon Vaman that the flower-bedecked being who sat there in state was stark naked; it was only on the third day after her employment that he awoke to the fact that he had been gazing, like Paris, on 'divinity disrobed'. He did gaze, fascinated; he was now sex-conscious, though his sense of the proprieties received a distinct shock. But he was too frightened to talk about it; he feared it was forbidden ground.

A week elapsed and, as Vaman was preparing to leave after receiving the usual sacred ashes and saffron powder, the Swami motioned to him to stay, requesting Girija Bai to leave them alone. He told Vaman, with a concerned air, that Dhumrakshi Devi demanded additional remuneration if her services were required any further.

Vaman gasped. He had not reckoned upon the chance of fitful demands being made in this fashion. When he paid a hundred rupees to the woman on the day of her engagement, he had understood that no further demand would be made. The expenses were mounting up, lengthening like Hanuman's tail. Blubbering, he started a piteous appeal to the Swami to save him from further expenditure.

"That's what I am striving to do and yet you behave as if I were blind to your interests. We managed to secure Dhumrakshi's services very cheap and that was because she had a great respect for this body. You must grant that a woman like her is not easily come across, and we cannot be satisfied with anyone who is not the absolute best. I have thought over the matter and I think I can find a way out. She wants to be paid at the rate of a hundred rupees a week and though it is not much, considering the sacrifices she is called upon to make, I think it would be unfair to tax you with the cost. Now, look here. Why shouldn't we get Dhumrakshi photographed and use the photograph in her place? The whole ceremony being symbolic, such a course would be perfectly proper. I think I can persuade Dhumrakshi to sit.

Whenever the Swami was very much in earnest, he lapsed from his ceremonious references to himself as "the Swami", or "this body"; but Vaman was far too preoccupied to notice this.

Vaman saw nothing unseemly in the Swami's suggestion; for the moment the anticipated relief from financial burdens occupied his entire attention, as the Swami had intended it should. He

inquired what it would cost to have photographs taken and on receiving the Swami's answer, he assented to the proposal hastily, lest the Swami should change his mind.

Nor was the Swami dilatory on his side. The very next day a photograph was taken. Dhumrakshi Devi, decked in flowers, occupied her place on the pedestal; Vaman was asked to sit beside her on the ground and when the Swami assured him that that was the only way to preserve his personal connection with the proceeding, he meekly went and sat at the spot indicated. He was so worried that he forgot Dhumrakshi Devi was wearing next to nothing; a loose towel had been thrown across her body while a more exiguous garland even than usual covered her bosom. Vaman never so much as looked in her direction, he was occupied in staring straight in front of him as the Swami required him to do. Vaman had never sat for a photograph since he left school and his notions of posing were primitive. He sat bolt upright and, in his attempt to keep still, succeeded in giving his hatchet face a stiff and scared appearance. The Swami gave the warning to be ready and within a few seconds, which to Vaman seemed an age, the camera clicked. Vaman, staring in front of him and almost in a trance, never noticed that just before the click of the camera the thread garland vanished and that Dhumrakshi, for the moment of the exposure, posed as on the day she was born, naked as truth. When at last he came to, he saw in front of him no more than an unusually serious-looking Dhumrakshi, in her accustomed costume of garlands and a very much abbreviated *sari*.

"She is rather in a huff at not being kept for the duration of the entire *puja*," whispered the Swami, to a gratified Vaman. "Well—let her! you shall not overpay if the Swami can help it."

Vaman almost worshipped him.

CHAPTER XVIII.

The Swami had striven—and not in vain—to keep his proceedings secret; but one wary eye he had overlooked or under-estimated—that of Saku Bai. Ever since the affair of the will Saku Bai had felt things getting out of gear at Benares; she shared her husband's distrust of Girija Bai, and with interest. She had never been enthusiastic for the Swami and familiarity had not improved her feelings towards him. Her family sense was strong and she had identified herself with the Athawars completely from the very beginning, putting the family before even the devotion she felt for Vaman. It was true she considered herself a very ill-used woman and was given to endless complainings; that apart, she guarded the family interest as no one else.

Now Saku, though she had at first been somewhat elated by Aunt Tholasi's exclusive bequest in her husband's favour, did not like the way in which it had been brought about. She knew the arguments which had been advanced and she was naturally distrustful of arguments. These were the weapons of a lawyer, whose business it was to make the worse appear the better reason, or as Saku put it, make the black appear as white. Then, Girija Bai kept poking her nose into everything; she might have been her mother-in-law, thought Saku, for the way in which she ordered her about. But what roused her suspicions most was the way in which money disappeared. She knew her

husband's unequalled capacity to make one rupee go the length of ten, yet hundreds had been spent in a few weeks and what was worse, unknown to Tholasi Bai. Had Aunt Tholasi been well she would have communicated her suspicions to her and then the two women would have taken counsel together; as it was, she had to put up with Vaman's own unnatural and evasive explanations.

All this worried Saku to distraction and there was no one whom she could take into her confidence. She thought of consulting Nilakanta Dikshitar but gave up the idea as he would have been about as helpful as her baby, Puntojee. In the end she wrote to her brother-in-law, Raghunath Rao. Saku Bai in speech was capable of effect and eloquence, but her epistolary efforts were few and far between and were famous for their obscurity; in her attempt to tell all she had in her mind she generally ended by making herself unintelligible. But this time she did succeed in conveying to Raghunath that Aunt Tholasi was seriously ill and that Vaman was not his usual self and that it would be a help if Gopinath or he would come. At Athawar House they concluded that Girija Bai must have been making herself a nuisance and that Aunt Tholasi would have been refusing to take any medicine. Gopinath wanted to start immediately for Benares with Sumitra and Raghunath, but the latter's wife, Santa, put forward a claim to be taken too. A family council was held and it was decided that Raghunath should go alone and fetch the whole party back to Kedaram.

Raghunath arrived at Benares without any sort of notice. Vaman had gone out to buy vegetables and

Girija Bai, who had met some people she knew at the temple, had stayed behind gossiping. Raghunath came in with his fair face begrimed with coal dust, a portmanteau in one hand and, in the other, a camp-bed strapped in a chocolate-coloured carpet. Saku, who had just returned from Visweshwar's and was giving the children an oil bath, received him effusively. Aunt Tholasi, whose health had shown some signs of improvement during the past two or three days, had felt strong enough to crawl to the backyard, where she was washing herself in warm water. Saku Bai ran in and told her that Raghunath had come and, before Aunt Tholasi could answer, Raghunath had come in and was eagerly questioning her about her health. She was a great deal better, she said, and since the previous day she seemed to feel almost as well as ever.

"I am very glad you have come, dear Raghunath. I knew you would. How are Gopinath, Sumitra and the children? Where is your wife?"

"They are all well, *athya.* My wife has gone to Bangalore. Sona is constantly asking for you. Gopinath and *vahini* Sumitra and Vaman's children are quite well."

"And Sakaram?" asked Aunt Tholasi, anxiously.

Raghunath's face clouded and he gave no answer.

They moved back to the central room where Saku brought them refreshments. Tholasi Bai sat on the ground leaning against a pillar and felt strong enough to discard her shawl. Her face had brightened up as it had never done since her illness began.

"It is almost like being back at Kedaram," she said.

"Is Gopinath very much distressed about the mortgage?"

"No fear," said Raghunath. "Gopinath is thoroughly unperturbed. He thinks he can pay up very shortly though he does not know how. His Kruschen feeling will never desert him."

There was a pause during which Aunt Tholasi's thoughts ran on Sakaram; Raghunath, sensing what was passing in her mind, thought it best to take the bull by the horns. As if in answer to the question which was forming in Tholasi's mind, he burst out:

"The mortgage is nothing, *athya*. If all be well it can be redeemed. But it is Sakaram who is the runaway horse. The dancing-girl has caught him cleverly in her net."

Aunt Tholasi's face showed she had feared as much.

"Lalita struck me as a good woman," she said with a half-absent air. "I thought she would deal with us fairly."

Raghunath nodded.

"I still do not think that Lalita is bad by any means. The fact remains there is a fatal attraction between her and Sakaram. If music be the food of love, as I have somewhere read it is, both of them have fed to repletion. In one sense we were all to blame."

"Has Kamakshi been to Athawar House lately?" asked Tholasi Bai.

"No," replied Raghunath. "We heard that she passed through Kedaram sometime ago on her way to Madura to attend a wedding. We thought that she would drop in on her way back but she didn't. All the

same, Sakaram bolted and was away for nearly a month."

"Where did he go?"

Raghunath hesitated for a moment. "He threw caution to the winds. Went for a spree with Lalita. She went to perform at Tinnevelly and from there both of them appear to have gone to Cape Comorin and then toured the Malabar country."

Vaman came in carrying vegetables, with Girija Bai at his heels. Rarely at a loss for words, her surprise at the arrival of Raghunath struck her speechless. Raghunath had to bring her back to her usual self.

"Hullo, Girija Bai," he said. "You are surprised, are you?"

"We had absolutely no idea that you were coming," she said, breathing a trifle heavily. "At any rate, I had not."

"I presume the pleasure is all the greater."

"I suppose so," replied Girija Bai dazedly.

In a few minutes, however, she recovered her composure and was soon chattering away. She asked for news of the Athawars and launched forth into detailed descriptions of Benares, the baths they had had and the uplifting spirituality of the place. Raghunath could not repress a smile; Girija Bai's devotion to matters spiritual verged on the incredible.

"Have you heard from Gandindi?" he asked.

This was a sore point with Girija Bai. Letters from her son were few and far between; and when they came they brought no news. But she hoped, however, that no news was good news.

"How is Susila?" she asked. Incidentally, this was her first reference to her daughter-in-law.

"She is all right, I understand. But it is rather a pity about your son-in-law."

Raghunath could not resist the temptation to make Girija Bai's flesh creep.

"What is a pity?" she asked, tremulously.

"I mean this wretched political business. They seem to have let him down very badly at Gandindi."

"What is the matter? I don't understand a word of what you are saying. Is Chakradara ill?" she asked, in a tone of the utmost concern.

"No, he isn't at all ill. On the other hand, I understand he was in the best of health. But it is this Congress business again. That is not for the like of us."

"Oh! the Congress. That is an old story. We have been asking him to drop it but he won't. That Lakshman Doss is his evil genius and he is sure to lead us to ruin."

"Lakshman Doss! He is out of it now. He has gone up to the University to resume his studies."

"Then, what is it? Tell me, please," pleaded Girija Bai.

Raghunath was most aggravating; his vague hint of impending danger was more than Girija Bai could bear. Kind old Aunt Tholasi, who understood little beyond that some evil was threatening Girija Bai's son-in-law, became instantly sympathetic and desired Raghunath to be more explicit.

"I hear the Congress people have been making trouble for themselves," said Raghunath. "They have

a new Collector and he is bent on teaching them a lesson, and I understand they are thinking of running them in under the security sections and poor Chakradara, I fear, is involved in it again in spite of himself."

Girija Bai lost all control of herself. Her devotion to her daughters was the one redeeming feature in a nature otherwise altogether ill. Beside herself with fear, she burst into tears and it required the united exertions of Raghunath, Aunt Tholasi and Saku Bai to console her and to convince her that reality might not be so bad as anticipation. For the first time since her arrival in Benares she thought of Gandindi and began to plan to return to it.

The sight of his brother threw Vaman into a panic; mercifully the *puja* was nearly over—but how to explain the Swami! He need not have troubled; astute eyes had already marked that figure carrying its portmanteau and camp-bed towards the Vasudeva Mutt. Within an hour, Vaman was sent for by the Swami who, in apparent ignorance of the arrivals from Kedaram, launched into his plans for the future, and Vaman was surprised to learn that these involved an early departure from Benares. The Swami was glad that Tholasi Bai was feeling so much better; that came of using the right specific. As for himself, "the Swami is not in the best of health. His exertions on your behalf have left him rather weak. He would like to take the *puja* a little more easily. It was very lucky that the photograph was taken. It dispensed with the need for hurry and the *puja* may with advantage be

spread over an extra fortnight. The Swami proposes to go to Hardwar and to perform the rest of the *puja* there. It will only enhance its efficacy. The *prasadams* will be sent by post. If you have no objection, the Swami will start this very night."

Vaman heaved a sigh of relief. Ever since his brother's arrival, he had felt himself on the edge of a volcano. His own communications with his brother were of the briefest description and he had no idea how much Raghunath had come to know of their doings at Benares. Apart from possibilities of discovery, the sight of brisk, twentieth-century, sceptical Raghunath made spiritual exercises with naked ladies with vacant, half-witted eyes, look more than a little disreputable. Vaman thought, "That photograph—have I been a fool?" In any case, it would be a good thing to be rid of the Swami and Girija Bai for a while; Girija was turning towards Gandindi and it was a most fortunate circumstance that the Swami should also think of leaving Benares at the same time. He told the Swami in gratified tones that he left everything entirely to him, as he was convinced that his interests were safe in his hands.

The Swami's reply was equally gratifying. A friendship, he declared, had been forged between them, which neither time nor absence could weaken. But it would be a mark of prudence to treat the world with a certain amount of suspicion. "The Swami would take leave to warn you that it is not absolutely necessary that your brothers should be apprised of all that we have been doing."

Seeing Vaman vigorously nod his head in appreciation of the warning, he added, "The Swami is greatly pleased that you are of the same opinion."

Then, gathering his robe about him and murmuring a blessing, he took his departure.

CHAPTER XIX.

Girija Bai went straight back to Gandindi and once there, she proceeded to show her teeth. With Raghunath's arrival Benares instantly became distasteful to her; for the first time in her feckless life she travelled post-haste and reached Gandindi one blazing afternoon in July. Tired and hot with the long journey across the blistering plains of Hindustan she was vexed at not finding anyone on the platform to receive her; she had sent no intimation that she was coming but that did not serve to lessen her vexation.

She took a single bullock-cart which bumped its way over the cobble-stones that liberally strewed the dusty roads which led by interminable lanes and alleys to the Brahmin quarter. Her son, Yadav Rao, was at school and Susila was resting in the dark-shaded room which overlooked the street. Susila was awakened by the sound of voices raised in dispute and she quickly realised that her mother-in-law had arrived and that a tussle was in progress with the bandyman over the fare. Girija Bai's directions had been misleading and so preoccupied had she been that she had not noticed the unfamiliar path the bandyman was taking. The tussle over, Girija Bai swept into the house, her temper none the better for her quarrel over the cart hire. Almost her first question was about Chakradara Rao who, she had fancied, would certainly have been clapped in jail. Susila told her that they were all well and that there had never been much danger of his going to jail and

that such anxieties as they had felt had all been set at rest. Chakradara Rao was attending to his work and was in the best of health and all his family were well. Reassured, Girija Bai gave Susila all the news from Benares in a jerky manner, as if she were performing a necessary duty. And it was not till she had bathed and got ready for her meals which Susila had hurriedly prepared that she asked about Susila's health. It was so obviously a belated concession to duty that it is no wonder it gave Susila no pleasure.

Dinner over, she took a cart and went straight to Chakradara's house and did not return home till late in the evening. Chakradara was at Court and it was Sundara Bai, his wife, who gave all the news in the true manner of the very much wronged woman. What Sundara Bai told her mother will never be known; that it must have been something very dreadful was evident; for the Girija Bai, who returned home after nightfall, was a very different person from the one that had left it earlier in the evening. When she left home she had not been in the sweetest of tempers; but now there was no holding her; she panted and spluttered in her rage. She came primed with complaints against Susila and Yadav Rao; the sum and substance of it was that they had looked on gloatingly while Chakradara was on the rack, without doing anything to avert the terrible calamity which threatened to overwhelm them and reduce them to ruin and eternal disgrace. Traitors! ingrates! vipers!—the hard words came raining down.

From that moment Susila's troubles began afresh. Girija Bai made no secret of her opinion that Susila was the cause of all Chakradara's troubles; the massed

evidence which her daughter had manufactured out of her head was too much for her. Day in and day out she hammered away at Susila with her taunts and reproaches. Yadav Rao, whom unfettered intimacy had awakened to a right perception of the charms of his wife, her sweet disposition and trustful regard, was stung into reproof. Not that his reproof amounted to much more than a tentative suggestion that there might be other ways of looking at the matter and that Susila was not the designing devil that her mother thought her to be.

"Chakradara's troubles!" feebly protested Yadav Rao, "all of them were of his own making, mother, and he is now safely out of them, thank God."

Girija Bai was surprised. What had happened to her son that he dared answer back like this? Such a thing had never happened before. That cursed Benares trip was responsible for this. He would have to be put in his place.

"Safely out—yes," shrieked Girija Bai, preparing herself for a gigantic attack. "But no thanks to you or to your highbrow wife. It was the Lord of the Seven Hills who took pity on that wretched and long-suffering daughter of mine and her innocent babes. Else, Chakradara would have gone to jail and his house to wrack and ruin to the delight of those to whom their prosperity has ever been an eyesore."

This was too palpable a hit to be ignored. The insinuation was more than Yadav could bear. He protested while his courage was slowly ebbing away.

"Nobody wishes them ill, mother; and why should

one do so? Please do not vex yourself with imaginary fears."

Girija Bai now awoke to a worse danger than Chakradara's supposed ills—rebellion rearing its head inside the family circle. A son of hers learning to answer back! This effortless being who had never had a will of his own had been worked upon and made into a man! That intriguing Athawar woman knew her job! The mice had been at play during the absence of the cat! She made surprised movements of anger, stuttered in her speech and proceeded to invoke the most varied curses upon all the family including herself for having borne such a numskull of a son. Against such violence of lamentation and abuse, Yadav Rao had no remedy and he quickly subsided into the inertia which was natural to him.

Susila bore everything with exemplary patience. Silent by nature, she seemed so thoroughly oblivious to the concentrated fire which Girija Bai directed against her that her indifference only acted as fuel to the fire of Girija Bai's indignation. In this way, between the cruelties which Girija Bai inflicted on her and the self-pity to which she condemned herself, life became a long-drawn misery.

While Girija Bai was thus making of life a hell for her son and his wife, a ray of hope seemed to come from Heaven. A child is the solver of all ills and Susila again got into the way of having one. For a time, the feeling that knowledge of it would bring gladness to the heart of the old woman almost made Susila forget her troubles. But of Girija Bai and her ways Susila had as yet but the most elementary ideas. When

Girija Bai came to know of Susila's condition she grew blue with repressed vexation. A child would only add to her daughter-in-law's pride and be another weapon wherewith to bring her already hopelessly infatuated husband to heel. The approach of motherhood became Susila's worst offence, the more so as decency required that Girija Bai should pretend to be pleased. The long and short of it was that Girija Bai and her daughter Sundara joined hands and between them succeeded in reducing Susila to a state of abject misery. As a first step they forbade her to visit the Anantakrishna Aiyars. It made her feel uppish, they thought. What had she in common with his family who were not even *Desasthas*? It was a disintegrating friendship, it fomented rebellion and cut at the root of the family. This dangerous friendship must cease. For a time the interdict had the desired effect, but when Anantakrishna's wife learned the way the wind blew she started paying visits to Susila, which increased in frequency and length. Girija Bai was at her wits' end. It would never do to shut the door in the face of the Sub-Divisional Officer's wife. But Sundara Bai was rich in resource.

"Make it clear to your daughter-in-law that you disapprove of these visits and she will see that the Tamil woman does not come," she said, like one who knew how to deal with situations.

Girija Bai lost no time in impressing upon Susila that Anantakrishna's wife should not set foot within her house. She was a mischief-making busybody, she said, coming into a poor *Desastha* home in season and out of season. She was out to wreck the family, to

teach her disobedience and to separate mother from son. "Oh, God! God!" she wailed, with every sign of the deepest anguish. "Was it not enough that we have got tied up to this hussy? Should she-devils from the Tamil country pursue us into our homes as well and add to our distresses."

Susila, shivering with rage and fright, stood up for her maligned friend.

"Why do you blame poor Lakshmi Ammal, a real Lakshmi both in name and good nature. If you so wish, I shall tell her she is not wanted here and she will doubtless stay away. What has she to gain from coming here? She only means to be kind."

Susila caught herself up with a jerk. She was surprised at having been betrayed into defence and she quailed at the thought of the storm she had unwittingly helped to brew. Girija Bai glared for a moment, gathered her *sari* round her shaven head, craned her neck with a violent twist towards Susila and snarled:

"Means to be kind, does she! Heaven preserve me from her kindness! The kindness of a woman who would be content with nothing less than sending my daughter's husband to jail. If you want her kindness, leave this house and go and bask in the sunshine of her favour and her husband's. Make yourself their body-slave but spare us the benefits."

As Susila's confinement grew near, her condition was pitiful in the extreme and even Girija Bai grew nervous. So much so that she was glad to compound with Anantakrishna's suggestion that Susila should be placed under the local doctor, Sastri. And Sastri had not had Susila under his treatment for three days

when the deity which specially presided over Girija Bai's destinies came to the rescue. It came in the person of Kadirvelu Swami who honoured Girija Bai with a visit on his way down south. He had toured, he said, the north country, had gone on foot to the shrine of Badrinath, amid the Himalayan snows, bathed in the Amritakund and prayed in the temples of Kashmir. He exuded holiness and, for the first time since her return home, Girija Bai rose to heights of spiritual exaltation which she had never reached since her return from Benares. The Swami was a veritable cornucopia, a *Kamadenu,* who could give all that one wanted. She saw Chakradara come back to position and power, she even hoped that he would be Government Pleader. Girija Bai saw the clouds lift. In her new-found joy she even warmed to Susila, and for that little mercy Susila was grateful.

CHAPTER XX.

The Benares trip had been conceived to indue the Athawars with outstanding spiritual merit; whether it did so or not was discernible only by the eye of faith. In regard to the more immediate concerns of the world, it was patent it brought no alleviation. Financially, for the first time in their house's long history, the Athawars were on the rocks;—a serious blow to a family whose strength hitherto had lain in its freedom from financial care.

Gopinath Punt piously resolved from time to time to effect retrenchments in the family expenditure. But he was no more equal to carrying them out than he was to driving a motor car. And indeed there was very little on which they could retrench; their only extravagance was their hospitality and it would have been easier for Gopinath to allow his right hand to be cut off than to shut his doors against the stranger asking for a meal or to reduce the number of Brahmins to be feasted on auspicious days. Gopinath therefore tried to compound by reducing his allowance of *ghi* and milk, but the rest of the family would not permit him even this elementary restraint upon himself.

There were other troubles. Sakaram, to all intents and purposes, was drifting away from home and the family. In Lalita's household ructions intensified. Gunavathi, for all her fangs and eyes of flame, was powerless; she writhed in impotent rage. At Sendil's instance, Atmaram took a hand in the matter and tried,

at first, to bamboozle and, subsequently, to intimidate Sakaram into giving up his beauteous prize. It was foolish, he said, to think of standing up to the Zamindar who could smash the Athawars to smithereens if he should only set about it. Sakaram had coolly answered that the Zamindar had better think twice before doing anything so silly and told Atmaram not to disgrace himself by acting as a procurer for Sendil. Sakaram was not the sort of person who indulged in vain boasts; he talked but little and when he did, it was to some purpose. There was a glint in his eye and a set about his face which silenced Atmaram.

The situation soon reached a critical point. Kamakshi Bai came and stayed in Athawar House longer than she had ever done before and after exhausting all her stores of vitriol and violent lamentation went back to her father. The distracted man came to Athawar House and pleaded with Sakaram to take his wife back.

"She is always welcome here," replied Sakaram. "I have never turned her out."

"Not by physical force, certainly," replied Rama Rao, the judge, "but by studied neglect and indifference."

There was truth in the remark. Sakaram hung down his head, conscious that he had not played the game. He felt for the old man, and though he tried to salve his conscience by remembering that Kamakshi Bai was not an easy customer he was too thoughtful and courteous to think of saying so openly.

Rama Rao asked Gopinath to intercede; but he soon realised that Gopinath was equally powerless. If anyone could have recovered the erring sheep to the fold it was Aunt Tholasi. But even she seemed curiously inert. Rama Rao gave up the task in despair and returned to his district; there he resolved at last to have the law on Sakaram. He engaged a lawyer in Madras and had Sakaram notified that his treatment of his wife amounted to cruelty and desertion and in the circumstances demanded that provision should be made for her maintenance in a style suitable to her status in life. In the result, the Athawars were called upon to pay Kamakshi Bai, upon a computation of income which staggered them, a sum of a hundred and fifty rupees a month for her maintenance in ease and comfort. The Athawar brothers being a joint family and therefore individually interested in charges on the family property, the notice was addressed to all the brothers jointly.

The receipt of the lawyer's notice sent a chill through the Athawars. They had a deep-rooted distrust of the law courts and instantly feared that Kamakshi Bai's father, who was an experienced Judge, must know what he was about; and that he was the last person to have shot a random bolt. They had no doubts whatsoever but that he would be as good as his word and would see the matter through in court and have all the dirty linen of the Athawars exposed to the public eye.

Neither the threat of suit nor Atmaram's dues worried Raghunath very much. Against the one he felt that the Athawars had a valid defence. And as

for Atmaram Sait, Raghunath knew that they were in no immediate danger and so long as they paid him the interest accruing annually he could not touch them until the expiration of the period stipulated in the bond. What really vexed him was the question of Ambu's marriage. This had been on the anvil for sometime past and now it was being pushed through. All the Athawars, men and women, were joining forces on this issue. The pilgrimage to Benares, it was taken for granted, had produced abundant spiritual merit, and visible testimony to its efficacy was afforded by its physical effect on Ambu. Ambu had profited immensely by the pilgrimage. She had grown and brightened up markedly. She seemed more alive since her return home and the crazy expression in her eyes seemed sometimes to have left her. In point of fact the look of vacancy which was her habitual expression of face was there still and Kailasa Asari and Sadasiva Rao's mother reaffirmed their view that marriage alone was required to complete the cure. They were all full of worldly maxims that reliance upon Heaven alone would not suffice to remove human ills but that endeavour on man's part was a necessary concomitant. Saku Bai had renewed her demands for an immediate marriage; the querulousness which once marked her actions crept back into her speech. Her views could not be brushed aside lightly; her position in the family reduced opposition to a minimum. She was so solid and sensible and so markedly the family's support and stand-by in the difficult times they were passing through that Gopinath and Tholasi Bai felt that Saku deserved the comfort and consolation of

having her way. Raghunath alone declined to be convinced and stuck firmly to the position he had taken.

He had no illusions, however, as to the effects of his opposition. Vaman, whose sullenness had latterly taken a defensive quality, was not likely to be influenced by Raghunath whose attitude was based only upon a conviction of acute unreasonableness. It shocked him that the half-crazy and ill-formed child, whom it was impossible to assume that nature had intended for a married life, should be compelled to mate with a man. The rest of the family were not slow to perceive the point of his opposition and caught their breath in thinking of it. They all agreed that it was cruel, that it would be far better that Ambu should stay at home in the enjoyment of that virginity of which she was not even conscious; but they were so wrapped up in custom that they were full of vague fears as to the consequences of prolonged maidenhood. Marriage was a woman's predestined state and to keep her out of it was a sin of the first magnitude. The talk went this way and that, but the eventual decision to get Ambu married without delay to the first man that came along did not cause any surprise to Raghunath. It only intensified his sense of impending doom that Ambu was not to be married from the paternal home with ceremonies spread over four days but was to be hustled through a very abbreviated ceremony limited to a single day in the temple among the hills of Kedaragiri.

A hunt for a suitable bridegroom ensued. No wonder suitors were lacking. Not one appeared who was fit to marry an Athawar. But so urgent was the problem that the Athawars satisfied their souls and

saved themselves from damnation by agreeing to marry Ambu to the thirty-year-old son of a distant relation, on the verge of bankruptcy, who agreed to take Ambu for a wife for a cash consideration of three thousand rupees and a house at Kedaram.

The day after Ambu's marriage the Athawars returned home to Kedaram after the early morning ceremony. Strictly speaking, they should have been in the highest spirits but as a matter of fact, they were feeling anything but festive. Already a feeling akin to remorse was taking possession of them for having imposed upon the half-witted, ill-formed girl a husband who was sure to discard her at the earliest possible moment. He was a disreputable sort of person, ill-favoured and lame of one leg. But they brushed aside all such disturbing thoughts and hoped that the reality might not be so bad as their fears.

The day was wild with monsoon winds. Raghunath was sitting in the hall downstairs idly reading the issues of the *Hindu* of the past three or four days which lay unopened in consequence of Ambu's marriage. His wife, seated on a beautiful Persian rug which occupied the middle of the room, was combing Ambu's hair, preparatory to dressing her up for the women's party they were having in the evening in connection with her wedding. Sona, who was growing up into a pretty and attractive girl, stood near, in a peacock-green *sari* shot with silver, a lovely jasmine wreath woven into her hair. She was going out to invite the lady friends of the family for the 'turmeric and saffron' party in the evening, when the married ladies would speed the newly-wed bride and bridegroom

on their career. Raghunath mentally contrasted the joy of life typified by Sona with the mockery of Ambu's marriage. He was not deceived by the dull preparations going forward; it was clear that the family were only striving to keep up appearances; jubilation, under the circumstances, was only a matter of form. What added to the dismalness of the position was the fact that the bridegroom's party made no secret of their belief that they had been tricked into a marriage with a girl of whose real deficiencies they had been kept in ignorance. The outlook for the future was very black indeed, and Raghunath thought of all the unhappiness which Ambu's marriage must almost of necessity bring in its train.

While he lay thus ruminating, a telegram was handed to him and it was with a premonition of coming evil that he opened it. As soon as he read it his face turned a deathly white and Santa, Sona and Saku who had come in, felt instinctively that it must be bad news from Gandindi. The telegram ran:—

"Susila died last night"— and was signed "Yadav Rao".

Santa read it and with a wail of despair told Saku that all was over with Susila. Saku's agonised shriek brought Aunt Tholasi and Gopinath to the hall. Gopinath fainted away forthwith. When he came to, he leaned against the wall, rocking with grief and murmuring "Why didn't I bring her home to die!" This thought added to the poignancy of their grief. It would have been some consolation if she had died at Athawar House amid the loved surroundings of her youth. Instead, she had died like an exile in a foreign

land with nobody to attend to her except the dreadful Girija Bai who must have mounted guard over her like an emissary of Death. They thought of all Susila would have liked to say on her death-bed, the message of love she would have wished to communicate and shook with uncontrollable emotion at the thought. Sakaram's heartrending cries were agonising to hear; and Vaman stood unmoving against the wall, a picture of silent misery. Aunt Tholasi shook like an aspen leaf; in a choking voice she tried to comfort Sona, whose grief seemed uncontrollable. Raghunath's own tears were welling up within him; with a manful effort he controlled himself and tried to assuage, as best as he could, the grief of the rest of the family. The lovely Susila, gentle and retiring, doomed from the start to unhappiness and misery, the Athawars had cherished with affection; her death seemed to Raghunath but the prelude to yet further evils to come. The Athawars' cup of misery was full and Raghunath sent up a silent prayer that Heaven might temper the wind to the shorn lambs and keep the young ones at least from harm.

PART THREE
1929 - 1934

CHAPTER XXI.

On a fine morning in the early summer of 1929, the air delightfully fresh and cool, Raghunath sat in his garden by the lattice railing which served to fence off the cement-platformed wall from the fernery. It was not so much a garden as a shrubbery of dwarf cocoa-nut and areca-nut palms which formed a green canopy overhead. The location of Athawar House was not favourable to the rearing of gardens; it stood in a populous street and the strips of open ground at the back of the houses hardly sufficed to accommodate a well and to drain off the backwash. But when Gopinath pulled down the old house, Raghunath had managed to save a square bit of ground at the southern end for making into a sort of rock-garden with a cool green fernery, with bright cannas and bougainvilleas. Here, with the day's *Hindu* and a book or two, Raghunath would sit of a morning, away from the madding crowd into which Vaman mainly, and misfortune incidentally, had converted Athawar House. Here he sat on this particular morning making ineffectual attempts to read the *Hindu;* Uma's pretty little daughter hung about him teasing him and giving twitches to his hair while Raghunath squealed with pretended pain to the delight of the child. Little Santa was greatly attached to her 'little grandfather' and when Raghunath was by, even her broken-down

wooden warrior, who was never out of disgrace, lay unheeded till Vaman's son, Chimna, pretended to appropriate the prized possession. And this morning Raghunath had another distraction—the vision of Sona sitting near him in a deck chair, a letter in her hand, while books and note-books lay about her; in her purple-and-gold *sari,* which set off her clear skin to perfection and with her profuse hair streaming down her throat and shoulder, she was a charming picture. She was evidently amused, for a smile hovered round her lips, showing a pretty pair of dimples in her cheeks. Raghunath, teased beyond endurance, gave up the effort to read and laid aside his paper. Gathering up Santa in his arms with a gesture of imminent punishment, which the child enjoyed delightedly, he asked Sona what the joke was about. She dimpled still further and said "It is these drawings, father. They are funny, indeed."

"Oh, you mean Venkatramani at the *Jamabhandi!* I rather like that picture of the Collector, looking hot and cross."

"I like the fat *peon* who stands puffing," said Sona.

"Yes. With importance and heat."

He took the letter from Sona's hand and showed it to Santa, who made a grab for it; but Raghunath salvaged it in time. He read the letter himself and remarked that Venkatramani seemed very much at home with his work. Venkatramani was learning *Jamabhandi* under his Collector's eye. He was enjoying it, but his Collector wasn't. Tax-collecting in the depth of the hot weather was not to his liking; his thoughts were away among the hills, concerned with

golf championships and Government House parties. The pencil drawings which had amused Sona were explanatory sketches in the letter wherein Venkatramani described the humours of the *Jamabhandi* season. Venkatramani was not a punctual correspondent but so regular and eager were Sona's letters to him that Venkatramani contrived to send her a line now and again and when he did it was most interesting reading. He had the knack of telling her just the things that would interest her and a whole file of letters which Venkatramani had from time to time sent to her from England was Sona's highly prized possession.

After the debacle of 1921, Venkatramani had been in low water for some time. But the discreet kindness of his grandfather saved him from the moping into which his fault-finding cousins would inevitably have driven him. Before the schools reopened in July his enthusiasm for Non-Co-operation had abated and he was longing to go to school again and resume the accustomed life of games and study. With Anantakrishna Aiyar's view that Non-Co-operation was a barren creed he could not bring himself to agree, but he was easily persuaded that for young men to give up school was not the best means of advancing the national cause. Going back upon his heroic avowals of March went against the grain sorely, but there was already talk of compromise and it was said that Mr. Gandhi had decided to call off the movement. Lakshman Doss came all the way from Gandindi and told Venkatramani that he had, on the whole, given a far better account of himself than the adult politicians of the district and that he had made sacrifices

enough for a schoolboy and urged him to resume his interrupted education.

"You may return to the charge later, Venkatramani, better equipped for the fight. Meanwhile, get on with your studies and put in all the learning that you can. I promise, we will keep the standard flying. I hope we shan't have made a mess of things for you."

Anantarama Aiyar, who had been very nervous when Lakshman Doss was announced, was mightily pleased and even Anantakrishna Aiyar admitted that Lakshman Doss was a far more decent fellow than many of his fellow-workers at Gandindi.

So Venkatramani joined the High School at Kedaram and worked away with a will for his examination. He took his bachelor's degree in 1926 and was high up among the first classes. Oxford had been on his brain ever since Branksome put it there that evening at Gandindi, but at his father's wish he sat for the Indian Civil Service examination at Delhi. This was a gruelling test and on the eve of the examination his mind seemed to be a perfect blank; all the facts stored in his mind seemed to be slipping away from him. He even thought he would throw up the sponge; it was a dreadful business, this answering of papers presumably intended to test one's ignorance and not knowledge. But he recovered his composure and sat through the ordeal, stiffening himself thereto by thinking of his father and mother and Anantarama and all the household gods. He had grave doubts as to whether he would pass the test and was surprised when he found that he had not only passed but ranked high among the successful candidates. He was sent to England for

training and he was now able to realise his ambition of going to Oxford. He joined Christ Church where he took a bachelor's degree in addition to passing the usual Service tests. These years at Oxford he put to very good use, filling all his spare time with visits to the country and the Continent and playing for Oxford in the University eleven. It was not very long before he fell under its magic spell and there was none more ardent in his devotion to that city of grey walls and antique towers.

Venkatramani, it was his father's complaint, was most irregular in his letters. Anantakrishna Aiyar, however, never let a single mail go without sending something in the nature of a homily in regard to hours, systematic study and visits to old Anglo-Indian friends on home leave or settled in retirement.

To Raghunath Venkatramani wrote more freely and with greater regularity; his letters were a long panegyric on the English and their ways, their beautiful home life, their civic organisation and easy social graces. Raghunath did not like the way in which Venkatramani fell for everything English; he had real apprehensions that Venkatramani might go over to those he still regarded as the enemy.

In one of his earlier letters Venkatramani had referred to a row he had had with a fellow student. They were having tea at Elliston's and Selby of Queen's felt called upon to make a sweeping assertion that Indian officials were, as a class, corrupt. Selby's opinion was based on knowledge derived haphazard from an uncle who was a planter in Assam and a cousin who was a junior officer in the Madras Police. His

bouncing self-complacency grated on Venkatramani. Ignore the remark he could not; for a reasoned debate he felt too shy and nervous; but his blood began to tingle, and he felt that he should not allow the statement to go unchallenged. On coming out of Elliston's, Venkatramani demanded that Selby should withdraw his offensive remarks; but Selby refused to do any such thing and Venkatramani, taking off his coat, proceeded to teach Selby a lesson. Selby gave as hot as he received and when the row was over and the antagonists rose from the ground, Selby had a black eye and a cut lip and Venkatramani had had a bad shaking. In the circumstances honours were easy. Selby, who was a sportsman and could admire pluck wherever he saw it, made an ample apology. The incident was the foundation of a strong friendship between the two, which grew with the years.

Raghunath had been proud to think that Venkatramani should so readily take up the cudgels for India; but soon there had been a change of tone in Venkatramani's letters and Raghunath sounded a note of warning now and again and cautioned him against breaking away from the old moorings. But in time, in his last years at Oxford, the pendulum swung again and Venkatramani wrote in a more sober spirit. Raghunath rightly interpreted this as merely the moderated praise which comes from larger experience and was sure that the admiration was there, unabated. To some extent he was relieved; with him it was a national duty not to indulge in overmuch praise of the White man; slurring over his strong points would even be meritorious; in any case, while inwardly proud

of Venkatramani's generous emotions he was anxious that he should not make himself a gift to every one in India by appearing to be more English than the English themselves.

Apart from his prejudices and predilections, Raghunath Rao derived considerable enjoyment from reading Venkatramani's letters. Venkatramani, it was clear, was making good. His delighted descriptions of country life in England, the easy companionship of boys and girls, pleased Raghunath immensely. He was aware only of the pleasure which he received by reading those letters; he did not know that they were actually converting him. In the state of ructions which had come to be the normal feature of the Athawar family he began now to ask himself whether family life as it was lived in England was not, in some respects, far better than the noisy junketing which seemed to be the main incident of joint family life in India. To Sona, Venkatramani's letters were a pure joy. It was evident that he enjoyed writing to her for he was able to strike the right note. College, play and the intercourse between students, he pictured vividly in an easy style which Sona was able to understand without any help from her father.

Sona, from being a mere schoolgirl had become a major family problem. She was quite fourteen and the question of her marriage was the most urgent question of the hour. According to the custom of the caste she should have been married long ago; ever since she was eleven the family had been agitating for it; and with every year the pressure had increased till it was now practically irresistible. Gopinath pressed

it; Vaman was positively rude about it, while Aunt Tholasi, getting on in years, pleaded in a voice which faltered a good deal. Saku Bai was equally insistent while Santa, Raghunath's wife, for all her supposed go-aheadness and education, took the same line. Against such odds, Raghunath apparently had no chance of having his way and he would doubtless have been talked into surrender but for one or two circumstances which tipped the scale. He had made up his mind to withdraw Sona from school when she had finished her fourth form. But Miss Lall, her Headmistress, interceded on behalf of the girl and begged him not to deny her a schooling for which Sona was said to be so apt. She was top girl in her class and had won many prizes; this, added to Miss Lall's manifest sincerity, made him change his mind and decide to keep her at school till she passed her School Final examination. He was convinced that such a course had everything to recommend it from the point of view of his daughter's happiness in life; for the barren orthodoxies of his well-meaning relations he had no use. But there was still no guarantee that he would take the line which appealed to him; Raghunath was too low-geared to do anything except follow a course which offered the least resistance. He was hovering between two minds, being pulled this way and that between the family on the one hand and Miss Lall on the other when, one day, a few months later, Venkatramani sent him a letter which bore the post-mark of a town in the Midlands. It was sent from the Selbys' home and, enclosed in the letter, there was a photograph of young Selby's sisters who were standing in a group with two or three young men

in tennis flannels, among them Venkatramani and his Bengali friend, Chatterji. They had been playing tennis in the vicarage garden, as Venkatramani explained. He said that the girls in the photograph were about the same age as Sona and wondered whether Sona would ever learn to play tennis. "But," wrote Venkatramani, "I could sooner expect her to fly to the moon,—though there is no reason why she shouldn't play tennis. Imagine little Sona running about, racket in hand! Won't Kedaram sit up and take notice? I suppose it would be practical politics to talk of her marriage. In fact, I heard a bird whisper that Sona's marriage is on the anvil and that the family is all agog about it. *Aiyo!* What a pity we won't give our girls a chance to grow up unshackled by premature marriages! But I am afraid I am straying outside my province and you will call me a denationalised, interfering busybody."

Raghunath read the letter which gave him furiously to think. He was tending towards postponing Sona's marriage for another year or two and this letter more or less decided him.

Vaman, when he heard of it, broke into excited comment. This did not worry Raghunath; he discussed the matter almost scientifically with all the family. Was marriage such an unmixed blessing as they seemed to imagine? he asked. What had Susila made of it and Sakaram, and Ambu, sacrificed for the sake of form? Gopinath instanced their own cases and said that with them marriage had been a success. That was so, agreed Raghunath. But recent experience in the family showed that the luck had shifted. Marriage

was a huge gamble and he did not wish to make Sona the stakes sooner than he could help.

Gopinath and Aunt Tholasi returned to the charge later, but after two or three trials gave up the attempt and decided to wait for another year. Though they spoke in the name of scripture and custom they had every sympathy with Raghunath's way of looking at the question and frequently caught themselves in the neighbourhood of wholesale agreement with him; they then checked themselves and refused to reason further lest they should be forced into open agreement with him. Reasoning in such matters, they thought, was a dangerous pastime. It amounted to setting up an *imperium in imperio* and this, Gopinath and Aunt Tholasi, brought up in the ways of their forefathers, would never agree to tolerate.

CHAPTER XXII.

The question of Sona's marriage was not the only bone which Raghunath had to pick with the family. A number of minor questions, trifling in themselves, kept them contending; without the slightest intention to antagonise one another the Athawars were drifting into a state of mutual avoidance. But their common misfortunes provided a cementing link and kept the family together, so much so that Raghunath idly wondered whether the joint family idea had been conceived for the sharing of sorrow with a view to its alleviation.

After a cloudless interval the troubles of the Athawars were beginning again. Atmaram Sait, that snake in the grass, was crossing their path at more points than one; the seven-year period fixed for the repayment of his loan was about to expire and the Athawars had not the ghost of a notion as to how they were going to meet his demand. By the practice of the severest economy they had managed to keep out of arrear in regard to their annual payments of the interest, or else they would have been delivered into the Sait's hands long before now. But Gopinath, that natural optimist, was now losing hope as well as health. He was becoming liable to aches and pains and his hold over affairs was perceptibly weakening. By rights Vaman should have taken his place but Vaman's adventures in Benares had dissipated his confidence in himself, with the result that the family responsibilities were landing on Raghunath's shoulders.

Raghunath's own inclinations were that he should be left alone. But when circumstances forced the management of the family upon him he accepted it without enthusiasm but with every intention of doing his best. Like most men unaccustomed to wield power, who are suddenly called upon to assume responsibility, he gave cut-and-dried decisions based upon mere intuition, and was surprised to find them accepted without demur. Aunt Tholasi said that she had always believed that Raghunath was not so unpractical as he appeared to be and, as everything seemed to confirm her opinion, she came to lean more and more upon him.

One of the minor mercies of the situation was his comparative freedom from Vaman's irritating interferences. For a time after their return from Benares Vaman had tried swagger and bluster in sheer self-defence. But the tale of his doings at Benares that came to light by degrees did not present him in a very agreeable colour. Aunt Tholasi had early taken Raghunath into her confidence and relieved her mind by relating in detail the circumstances connected with the will she had made at Benares. It had lain heavily on her mind, the unequal treatment she had given to the Athawars, and she wanted to undo the injustice by a formal revocation of the Benares will. This Raghunath enabled her to do without loss of time. The circumstances attending the making of the first will were not put to Vaman's discredit. Scheming for selfish ends was never known to be Vaman's weakness; his crankiness was merely the wrong-headed expression of his strong family sense. That Vaman had been the dupe of a designing Swami and the woman from

Gandindi was the ready verdict of the family; so much so, their view of his doings at Benares was touched with a feeling akin to pity for the misguided man. And, in fairness to Vaman himself, it must be said that he realised that he had made a stupendous ass of himself and was grateful for the considerate way in which his doings were viewed by his brothers.

But the full story of Vaman's iniquities had not yet been told to the Athawars. There was mention of a Swami, of course, but he remained a vaguely disquieting figure in the background of their minds; they regarded him as a sinister influence who had come into their life and, thanks to the protective mercy of Kedareswar and, Syamaladevi, had passed out of it before it was too late. For one brief period he once again swam into view and that was when he descended upon Girija Bai's household and undertook the treatment of Susila. Her death had definitely stamped him as a baleful figure whom a cruel destiny had hurled across their path in life. Further, it was not possible to speculate. And now suddenly the Swami, this baleful figure, began to reappear, gathering all his forces for the attack. He now appeared in the role of spiritual adviser to the Zamindar of Sendil who certainly stood in need of all the advice, spiritual and temporal, that was to be got; his affairs were in such hopeless and inextricable confusion. The Swami had decided to devote all his powers to the rehabilitation of the finances of the Zamindari; as a side-line, he had promised to satisfy the demon of desire which gnawed at the Zamindar's heart by bringing Lalita down on her knees. Litigation in the family and the Zamindar's preoccu-

pations therewith, added to Lalita's unrelenting obduracy, had made him forget her for a while but now, with what he had no doubts were the certain means of gratification, the old Adam rose clamorously and would not be laid. How the Swami succeeded in getting into the *entourage* of the Zamindar need not detain us here; it was, however, clear that Atmaram Sait had something to do with it. Anyway, the Swami had passed his word to the Zamindar and for its redemption he set to work with a will.

The first intimation which the Athawars received of his existence was a report that the Swami had passed through Kedaram and had been visited by Vaman. This, by itself, was not disquieting and Raghunath only hoped that Vaman would take care not to walk into the Swami's parlour again. From the way in which Vaman talked of the visit it was evident that he had, at any rate, no such intention; his disavowal of intimacy and protestations of horror were too vehement to be feigned. And, in the days that ensued, the mention of the Swami brought a scared look into Vaman's face. In fact, a trifle too scared, thought Raghunath. In time, however, there appeared to be a resumption of confidential relations; and what disturbed the Athawars was that Vaman was most uncommunicative. When pressed he loftily desired to be left alone saying he could be trusted to take care of himself. More disquieting were the demands for money in blocks of fifties and hundreds which Vaman made with increasing frequency and the need for which he resolutely refused to disclose. One day, Gopinath tried a little firmness. "I insist upon your telling me, Vaman, what

you do with all this money." "Why should you pester me with questions," he stormed, "I am not begging for charity. Put all that I draw to my account and let it go in reduction of my share of the family property."

Gopinath was pained. Vaman never in all his life regarded himself as separate from the family and his assertion of legal right was, to Gopinath's mind, a sure sign that things were not fair and square. Nothing was left to Gopinath except to pray to the household gods to save his brother before it was too late.

It was through Sakaram that revelation came for it was at Sakaram that the Swami delivered his first attack.

When Lalita took the bit between her teeth and bolted she had no intention of turning back and to this she stuck with remarkable resolution. Gunavati, shocked and scandalised, bit her lip and beat her breasts and swore for all she was worth; but all her savageries were of no avail. She then went into a ponderous silence, hoping that her evident unhappiness might make Lalita see reason. But Lalita did not seem to mind in the least taking her foster-mother's resignation at face-value. Gunavati stirred again; never one to take things lying down, she decided to make a fight for it and went straight to Atmaram Sait, her invariable counsellor in distress and difficulty. A new suspicion had come upon her; the crafty Brahmin must have drugged her poor, unsuspecting daughter; there was no other way of accounting for the wretched girl's infatuation. Here was an idea; it ought to be looked into. Atmaram considered for a minute and then told her there was something in what she feared. "Let us

get hold of Munda Kadirvelu Swami" said Atmaram, "he is the man." Gunavati jumped at the idea. "But," she said in some alarm, "I have not the money for it.',

"Nonsense, woman," said Atmaram winking a wicked eye. "The Zamindar will bear the expense and, if it comes to that, Sakaram Rao's father-in-law. We have just to look on while they do the sowing and then we enter only to reap the harvest."

For the first time in several months, Gunavati was a happy woman.

The Swami lost no time in getting into touch with Sakaram. He called at Lalita's house, ostensibly to meet Gunavati and, at her request, to diagnose Lalita's malady. Sakaram was there on the premises but the Swami, who just sized him up with the corner of one eye, behaved as though he was unaware of his presence. Sakaram, to whom Swamis and *fakirs* were noxious beings to be avoided like the plague, decided to give him a wide berth and quietly slunk away. As yet he had no suspicion of the bearded individual's identity; it was enough for him that he belonged to the same poisonous breed as the man who had played the shabby trick about Aunt Tholasi's will and had seemed to be hand-in-glove with the woman at Gandindi. It was not long, however, before he was face to face with the Swami.

The encounter came one evening when the lamps had just been lit. Gunavati had gone to the temple leaving the Swami in conversation with Sakaram; Lalita was in the room adjoining the hall, decking her hair with sweet-smelling jasmine-wreaths which Sakaram had brought with him from the flower bazaar.

With one ear cocked to hear what passed between the Swami and her lover, Lalita stood before the mirror, a vision in mauve, giving the final touches to her hair which was wound up in a plait against the back of her head. Addressing Sakaram, the Swami said, "Sakaram Rao, it is not fair the way you are treating your wife. She comes of a respectable family."

Sakaram considered this an impertinence and was about to say as much when a look from Lalita made him restrain himself. He said icily that there was nothing of the kind.

"I hope you do not mind the Swami telling you that it is time you change your ways, Sakaram Rao. You come of a well-known house and you should not provide food for slanderous tongues."

The Swami seemed to speak more in sorrow than in anger; but there was a glint in his eye which Sakaram did not like. There was justice in his remark, however, and Sakaram could find no reply worth making.

"It is unfair to your wife and this simple-minded girl here," continued the Swami, nodding in the direction of the room where Lalita was dressing her hair.

Sakaram looked up.

"How unfair to this girl?" his lifted eyebrows seemed to ask.

"Lalita is much in demand, more than any other girl of her caste that I know of. She is destined to make a fortune and you are standing in the way."

Disrespect stirred within Sakaram. "How can *I* prevent the workings of destiny? She may be more fortunate than we guess."

The Swami had not been accustomed to be debated with. His muscles twitched in repressed anger.

"Now, look here, sir, I advise you to give up this girl. You are the cause of much unhappiness in this household. Go back to your wife or not as you like but I insist that you leave this girl alone."

The Swami showed his teeth very plainly indeed. If he had kept up appearances and proposed to speak in Kamakshi Bai's interest, Sakaram might have been more gentle with him; but this dropping of Kamakshi Bai's cause, which the Swami had professed to have at heart, disentitled him to any consideration whatsoever. Clearly it was Lalita who counted, not Kamakshi.

"I shall give up Lalita when it pleases me. The Swami, doubtless, has more important matters to claim his attention."

"This is the most important matter at the moment claiming the Swami's attention. The Swami, whenever he sets his mind on doing a thing generally has his way. People know it to their cost."

"I can understand that," said Sakaram under his breath.

The Swami caught his meaning, swore under his breath and proceeded:

"It is good you understand that. Else it may lead to unnecessary complications. Now, to come to the point, I am deeply interested in this girl."

"So am I."

"Please do not interrupt. The Swami is not used to it!"

"Nor am I used to being dictated to," said Sakaram with dignity.

"There is no dictation. The Swami is not interested in the affairs of the world. The Swami may occasionally help a soul in distress but to interfere with the doings of men needlessly is not his way."

Sakaram felt he had scored a point and could be more gracious.

"I am glad the Swami entertains such friendly feelings and the desire to help certainly does him credit."

Too late Sakaram realised that he was patronising and checked himself; but his tone and manner had already jarred upon the Swami.

"You see, according to the tenets of Lalita's profession, she ought to be at the disposal of the highest bidder. There are people who are willing to be her slaves and to make her rich beyond the dreams of avarice. Her infatuation with you prevents her from coming into her own."

Sakaram deliberately yawned. "Lalita seems to be perfectly happy with her present condition."

For the first time the Swami laughed. It was a guffaw of pity for Sakaram's ignorance.

"That is the pity of it. People in this world are blinded by *Maya*. They do not know what is good for them. They mistake the dross for the gold."

Sakaram felt tempted to ask what part *Maya* played in regard to the lure of wealth and how far this creed fitted in with the Swami's solicitude for Lalita's increasing financial prosperity. But he did not want to prolong the discussion and he waited for the Swami to stop, when he intended courteously but yet firmly to take his leave.

The Swami continued. He saw that Sakaram was not convinced.

"It has been ordained that the Swami should see that Lalita is not hampered in her calling by the demands of her immature fancy. Much unhappiness is bound to result otherwise. Gunavati, to whom Lalita owes everything, needs to be considered. And there is more, a great deal more than I can tell or you can understand.

"I shall not trouble the Swami for his reasons. They are doubtless sound."

The cynical accent in Sakaram's tone was not lost upon his adversary.

"Then will the Raoji agree to drop her? It is not as if he should not see her at all. Once in a way, he is welcome to call at her house and renew the old friendship."

"For this mercy, thanks," said Sakaram, scornfully. "I hope I know my convenience and shall order my movements accordingly. And now I think I had better make a move," and he rose to leave.

"Wait!" said the Swami, in quite a new voice. He thrust his hand into his toga-like robe and took out, in a leisurely manner, a photograph and handed it to Sakaram. Lalita, who had finished her toilette stood by the rosewood shelf which held her silverware, her eyes flashing. Her heart went out to her lover who seemed thoroughly unafraid of the Swami and was moreover scoring against him. Still, could Sakaram win through? The Swami, they said, was a man of power, who could make ropes of sand and walk on water.

Sakaram took the photograph and looked at it idly. In an instant, a look of horror overspread his face. He looked from the photograph to the Swami and from the Swami to the photograph. Then he dropped it to the ground as if it was a hot cinder.

The Swami took the dropped photograph and blew the dust from it deliberately. He placed it on his lap like a loved child and smiled serenely, saying in his softest manner,

"Why are you staring, my dear sir? What remarks have you to offer?"

At last Sakaram found his tongue. "It is some huge humbug."

Lalita was standing on pins and Sakaram mutely sought her eyes. The Swami noticed the movement and remarked blandly:

"I do not think the lady can be of any help. I do not think she knows anything about this pretty adventure."

Lalita could not restrain her curiosity any longer. From where she stood she asked:

"What is the matter?" But subconsciously she felt that it was something truly terrible and her heart sank to the brick tiles on the floor.

"You would like to know, would you?" asked the Swami, forgetting to be a Swami any longer. "Well, I hope Sakaram Rao won't mind my telling you. His brother, Vaman Janardhan Rao, once behaved in a very silly fashion. He is a very good man, with the finest impulses, but he happened to meet a rather taking sort of woman at Benares and you know she clean bowled him over. It seems to run in the family, this *flair* for

liaisons. Sakaram is wary; he does not go in for intrigues with married women. But his brother, a very knowing man, indeed, once lost his head and ruined a happy family. The husband came to know of it recently and is only waiting for some conclusive piece of evidence, for it is very difficult to convince a court, especially where a man of good family is concerned and in a criminal case, it seems, the accused party can sit with folded hands and wait for the accuser to make out a convincing case. Here is conclusive evidence in my possession and the husband is pestering me to let him have it. I would show it to you, Lalita, were it not too shocking. Really, I wonder what possessed Vaman Janardhan Rao to get himself photographed with the lady. Very unwise, very unwise," said the Swami, shaking his head sadly.

Sakaram, whose gorge was rising every minute, almost shrieked;

"My brother is incapable of it. It is a libel. A most cruel libel." His eyes were aflame with helpless wrath.

"It is, on the wretched husband," remarked the Swami, provokingly.

Lalita made as if to take the tell-tale photograph from the Swami. The Swami held it back and looked doubtfully at her; then, seeming to think better of it, he said:

"Look at it if you like. You may understand the position and probably help the Raoji to see reason."

Lalita took the photograph and after a hurried look handed it back to the Swami. It showed Vaman by

the side of a woman, completely naked save for a flimsy garland too exiguous even to cover her shrivelled-up breasts. The woman had a far-away look in her eyes, she looked ill, half-witted. Yet there she was, stark naked; and there was Vaman.

Sakaram rose helplessly to go. Lalita made to stop him, but the Swami intervened.

"Don't detain him, please. I believe he wants to go and do some strenuous thinking." And, inclining his head towards Sakaram he said, with mock courtesy, "Let the Raoji not wait. He may go."

CHAPTER XXIII.

Sakaram went, his mind in a whirl. From above his surging thoughts one idea stood out, and that was that he should lose no time in telling his brothers of this appalling disaster. He walked hurriedly homewards, but when he came to the crossing near the flower bazaar he changed his mind and decided to go for a quiet walk to collect his thoughts. The flower bazaar was one of his favourite haunts and he loved to go there of an evening to buy flowers for Lalita and to gaze on other cheerful folk engaged in buying gifts of flowers for worship and for the womenfolk at home. But to-day the sight of chaffering humanity disagreeably affected him. He turned in the direction of the river and struck out for the open fields. A cool breeze was blowing and on it was borne the chime of the distant temple bells. Sakaram gazed into the blue sky overhead and saw that his birth-star, the Pleiades, had arisen. In his childhood he had always looked out for it and he used to claim it, in a manner, as his own. The sight of the star, which to his mind was curiously suggestive of the diamond-studded *bulak* Lalita wore above her lips, made him forget his troubles for a while. The Pleiades seemed to gaze at him answeringly and bid him be of good cheer. He went past the green paddy-fields waving in the breeze and met groups of labourers returning home from the fields diverting themselves with merry jests and song. He came to a wayside shrine where Ganesh, the elephant-

god, sped travellers on their way. There, on a stone platform he sat and attempted to puzzle out what seemed to him an incredible tangle. A strange helplessness seized him. He wondered if it was not all a dream, and as he had read of people doing in books, pinched himself to see if he was awake. But thinking, if one could dignify by that name the disjointed processes of his mind, did not help to a solution. He sat, heedless of the deepening evening till a pi-dog's unearthly howl reminded him it was time to go. He looked up and the splash of stars in the belt of Orion told him that meal-time was at hand, and he turned homeward no clearer in his mind as to the new danger than when he had left the Swami.

When he reached home the family were at supper. Having no regular work to do and being answerable to none, the Athawars were late diners. They rarely sat for supper until the lights were out in the houses of their neighbours and the rest of the street were in bed. Even so, Sakaram was unusually early for his supper. He was nowadays chronically late and a leaf was always laid for him against his arrival which was generally not till the rest of the family were preparing to go to bed. Gopinath was surprised to see Sakaram arrive so early and sent word to him to join the family at supper; they were having pepperwater made in the Mysore way with a dash of lemon in it. Still preoccupied and moody, Sakaram came up and finicked with the potato chips, saying nothing. He found that a discussion was in progress; it was not convivial but was conducted with the wary seriousness of a proceeding in the law courts. Its subject was that hardy

annual, Sona's marriage; with the approach of the marriage season animated discussions on the subject were the order of the day to the exclusion of every other topic. Raghunath was very slow in making up his mind about this and even now it was not clear whether he had come to a decision. He had put it off from year to year, always shelving the problem for the time being. Sona was past fifteen and there could be no excuse for delaying her marriage any longer. Raghunath conceded that the marriage had been held up long enough and further postponement was not necessary and would probably be unwise. Her School Final examination would come off in March and he felt that she had had all the education a woman needed. Had there been a suitable bridegroom in view, Raghunath would have agreed to a marriage. But there was only one candidate for Sona's hand worth considering and even he, to Raghunath's mind, was poor stuff. It was a nephew of his wife's whom the family joined in recommending as a suitable bridegroom. He had a fair amount of conventional good looks, but as Raghunath said, the lad lacked spunk and Sona deserved somebody live and bright. So there they were at it, excitedly using the same time-honoured arguments. The boy wasn't educated enough, thought Raghunath. He had got stuck in the Intermediate; it was clear there was going to be no University degree for him. That did not matter in the least, said Santa his wife; he had a home to take his wife to and that was all that counted —to have a roof to one's head. Raghunath was surprised to hear his comparatively modern wife talk in this strain.

"Santa is right," said Vaman in a thin voice. "Education hasn't paid with this family."

Said Gopinath pleasantly, "Father and mother have spoken from their respective points of view. So have they spoken since the beginning of time. But what has Sona got to say in the matter?" he asked with a gentle smile at her.

Sona smiled shyly. She said "What can I say, *kaka*" and went on drinking her cup of milk sweetened with candy and almonds.

Chimna, Vaman's son, struck in. "She wants to marry Venkatramani," he said and cocked a mischievous eye at Sona, who blushed to the roots of her hair. Aunt Tholasi smiled weakly at what she hoped was a mere joke and then reproved Chimna for saying such things. Vaman came down on his son with a thud. "Silence, you thoughtless renegade, putting such idea into the child's head!"

Chimna, a hot-tempered youth, flung a ready reply. "The idea is not mine. It is hers and Venkatramani's."

Sona gathered herself in confusion and, with tears of mortification, rushed into the adjoining room. Gopinath, not liking what he saw, but at the same time wishing to make peace, called out to her endearingly, but she had locked herself in. Raghunath, who had watched Sona through the corners of his eyes, was not sure whether there was not more in Chimna's unconsidered remark than met the eye. An embarrassed silence followed which was broken by Gopinath.

"Venkatramani seems to be doing very well indeed. Why does not Anantakrishna get him married? I

understand that Dewan Bahadur Ramanatha Sastri was anxious to secure him for his daughter."

"Venkatramani does not care for the girl. She is not educated enough, he seems to think. Anantakrishna had rather set his heart on this marriage, and, I believe, he is worried."

"Has Venkatramani any preferences?" asked Gopinath, innocently.

"If he has, he hasn't told anyone yet."

"I hope he is not going to tie himself up to a white girl like that fellow of whom Anantakrishna was telling us the other day."

Raghunath left his leaf and, going to the courtyard, washed his hands and face. Gopinath, who was having a drink of milk, finished it at leisure and stayed on till Sakaram was ready to rise. Sakaram was gloomy and silent and appeared to eat nothing; he had no notion as to how he was going to break the news to Gopinath. During supper he had been thinking of the enjoyments of Nero while Rome was burning, and he asked himself whether he would not be wise to hold things back and allow revelation to come in some other way. In any case, he would not have broken the news in the presence of the assembled family; he had been watching Gopinath closely during the meal and was struck afresh by the look of weariness in his face. His flesh seemed to hang loosely about him, while quite a number of furrows appeared in his wan cheeks. His voice and manner had lost their accustomed geniality and a pang shot through Sakaram at his brother's rapid decline in health. Gopinath had troubles enough surely; Atmaram Sait and his bond loomed on the horizon; and the

thought of how he was going to pay was well-nigh driving Gopinath mad; Ambu, unrecovered and sprawling on the floor, a limp, loose-limbed creature, was a constant trial; now, Sona's marriage threatened to raise new complications. Sakaram trembled to think of the effect of a communication of Vaman's reputed adulteries. In the midst of this, he thought of Lalita, and wondered how she was taking the Swami's latest plan to sunder them. He decided to see her in the morning privately and come to an understanding with her.

Gopinath went and washed his hands, and feeling rather out of sorts, as he often did nowadays, lay on the couch which was placed on the verandah adjoining the hall. Formerly he slept regularly in the open, but now it was considered unwise and Gopinath, who liked to sleep in full view of the sky, chose the verandah. He sent for Sakaram and asked him to play for a while on the *vina*. For some considerable time past Sakaram had become a stranger to the family and the old habit of playing after meals had ceased, owing mainly to Sakaram's impossible hours. Sakaram was in no mood for music, but he did not wish to deny his brother, the more so as he guiltily realised that this was a pleasure which he had long ceased to give him. He brought his instrument and, unasked, played Gopinath's favourite air, *Jenjuti,* and sang Tholasi Doss' song commending the soul to its Maker as the only means of relief against the buffets of an unkind Fate. Its plaintive note suited his mood, and Gopinath, who listened with moist eyes, soon fell into a gentle doze. After half-an-hour's playing Sakaram felt a sensation of relief for which he had been vainly struggling all the evening. Seeing that

Gopinath had fallen into sleep, he laid his *vina* aside and went in quest of Raghunath.

Raghunath lay in a long chair upstairs, in a brown study. He was surprised to see Sakaram at that unusual hour, and a feeling that something was wrong which had come to him during supper now tightened about his heart. Without any expression of surprise, Raghunath asked Sakaram to take a chair, and watched him unobserved. Responsibility, in Raghunath's case, was bringing out unsuspected reserves of strength, and he had learnt to hold himself in patience in all situations. Sakaram asked Raghunath to come out into the open verandah so as to be free from interruption. "Free from interruption! Then it must be very bad," said Raghunath to himself. They went and sat on a bench. The tiled roofs of houses swarming beneath them added to the gloom of their surroundings. The blue sky overhead richly splashed with stars was the only thing of beauty, but the brothers did not look at it. Sakaram could not bring himself to speak.

For a minute or two neither spoke. Sakaram did not know how to begin.

"Well, Sakaram, what is it?" asked Raghunath by way of helping Sakaram out.

"I am only thinking of our family troubles. There seems to be no end to them."

"There is nothing to do but grin and bear it. After all our luck must change one day."

"I doubt," said Sakaram, shaking his head.

"Don't be downhearted, Sakaram. The longest lane has a turning."

"The turning is not in sight. Our troubles, I think, are just beginning. Of that I am perfectly certain. What we have endured is nothing to what we shall have to face in the future."

Raghunath grew uneasy. "What is it you have in mind?" He had a moment of intuition. "Is it anything concerning Vaman?"

"Yes. It seems to be a very bad lookout for him—for all of us."

"I feared as much," replied Raghunath, ruminatingly. "That Swami of his is a greater scoundrel than we thought, I expect."

"He is the devil himelf," burst out Sakaram.

"What is his game now, if you happen to know? I suspected Vaman's unprecedented withdrawals were for meeting the Swami's demands, though they have ceased for some time now."

"Ceased! It was only the panther crouching before its spring. He wants to run him in for adultery, and he won't rest till he has done it," he snorted.

It was out. Sakaram had intended to lead gently up to it, but the talk had not moved according to plan.

Raghunath literally started in his seat. He opened wide his eyes and gazed at Sakaram in speechless horror. "Vaman! Adultery! Of all the persons on earth! What do you mean?" he stammered.

Sakaram told his tale, and Raghunath listened in amazement. At its conclusion he said, "It can't be true. It is impossible. Vaman is not made that way. I would believe almost anything else of him, but this is unthinkable. It is some huge hoax."

"I wish to God it were! But the proof is irrefutable. I have seen it with my own eyes. Vaman sitting bolt upright with complete self-possession, and the woman, naked as on the day she was born, and almost leaning on him. It was madness, unspeakable madness. But it's true."

There was a pause, during which Raghunath suffered torments. At last he said slowly, "Who is the woman? Have you any idea?"

"Not the slightest, except, of course, that she is married. The Swami mentions a husband who is still in the background."

They talked round and round the subject, feeling utterly lost at every turn. Sakaram had no doubts that Vaman had lost his head completely for once and been caught in the Swami's coils. Through the accumulation of proof Raghunath alone found himself inwardly pooh-poohing the story of Vaman's lapse from morality. They decided to ask Vaman and to keep the matter from Gopinath's ears as long as possible. Raghunath was clear in his mind that the matter should be investigated and that they should not give in to the Swami without a struggle. Now and again during the talk Raghunath caught himself hoping that Sakaram might make the demanded sacrifice and break from Lalita. But it wounded his pride that his brother's abandonment of his mistress should be forced on him by the threats of a designing ash-besmeared scoundrel with a Sanyasi's staff.

Their beds were brought, and they lay side by side. They talked through the night, for sleep would not come to them. For the first time in their lives Raghu-

nath and Sakaram discussed the affairs of the family in detail and seemed to get relief by going over the ground together united in a bond of brotherly sympathy. More than anything else, it was the thought of Aunt Tholasi and of Gopinath which made the burden of their latest grief altogether unbearable. At intervals they woke up and each gently called to the other to see if he slept. There was always a response, and new aspects of the matter were discussed. So on, through the night they lay in bed, tossing restlessly and exchanging thoughts and hopes, and when the darkness lifted in the eastern sky and the cocks crew in the Yadava settlement in the street behind, Raghunath rose with heavy eyelids and a heavier heart. Sakaram was asleep at last and, with a look of tender pity at the handsome youth, Raghunath gathered himself up and proceeded downstairs. It was the unluckiest day of his life, and he did not know what further misfortunes the day would bring him. But he set his teeth and clenched his hands, prepared to face the worst.

CHAPTER XXIV.

When Raghunath came downstairs he found that Saku was in one of her tantrums. Many things contributed to her ill-humour; this morning it was Ambu who was the cause of her vexation. Ambu was sick, and refused to be doctored. She lay sprawling on the floor, her hair all tousled, trailing her *sari* on the unswept floor. Raghunath went up to her and told her in a kindly voice to take a dose of the mixture which the doctor had sent overnight, but Ambu might have been miles away for all the notice she took of him. Raghunath measured out the dose and, patting her on the shoulder, tried to coax her into taking the medicine, but Ambu started up, shook him off, and rushed into Sona's room and lay there in a heap all the morning.

Poor Ambu! Her situation intensified the sense of tragedy which seemed to Raghunath to hang over the house like a pall nowadays. As if it was not enough to get her formally tied up to a man, they needs must go and make her over, body and soul, to her husband. And the husband, hating Ambu all the time, proceeded to exercise his rights without reserve or compunction and had succeeded in inflicting motherhood upon her. The poor girl had absolutely no notion of what had happened to her; of her condition and the rites which led up to it she seemed thoroughly unaware. Having done his worst, her husband took himself away and never sent to ask how she was doing. Saku for the first time in her life, cursed the system which sought

to impose the yoke of marriage on girls regardless as to whether they were fit for it or not.

Raghunath went looking for Vaman; Gopinath, he had already made up his mind, he would not tell as yet. Gopinath seemed to be breaking up; he could not stand the shock of this grim disclosure. Vaman was at the well in the back-garden, washing himself and joking away for all he was worth. It was clearly one of his jovial—nay, hilarious—mornings and it grieved Raghunath to think that he must shatter his good humour, for it was as rare a circumstance as ever for Vaman to be gay. Raghunath's heart failed him; an adulterer Vaman he could have tackled but a buffoon Vaman was more than he could face; he decided to speak to Saku instead. If there was anything in the story Saku should know; in any case, it would be a good plan to confide in her, for she was so sensible and strong. He did not mind her being cross that morning; he knew that, faced with urgent problems, she would forget to be cross and rise to the occasion.

His ablutions over, Raghunath went into the breakfast room, an airy apartment which overlooked the garden. Gopinath was already there, resting for a while before morning worship, which was as sacred to him as ever. His wife, Sumitra, whose graying hair made her look more of a grandmother than ever, was dressing Sona's hair; Sona, fresh from her cold bath, looked delicious in the lace-bordered, white muslin *sari* she liked to wear of a morning. A wicker-trayful of roses and *champak* flowers filled the room with a delicious scent. Sona was busy stringing a garland of jasmine for Ravi Varma's picture of Saraswati which

hung over the door-way, the only picture in the room. Her mother, easy-going as ever, was still in bed upstairs. Saku was flitting about, handing round coffee. She brought a couple of Sirumalai plantain fruits and placed them in a silver salver before Raghunath, who was once again struck with her brisk competence and businesslike efficiency. When Aunt Tholasi should be gone, Saku Bai would take her place as the guardian of the Athawars, thought Raghunath.

"Where is Sakaram?" asked Saku Bai, still in a cross humour.

"He is still in bed," replied Raghunath.

"Why? Is he unwell?" asked Gopinath.

"His health is all right. I think he sat up very late. He was sleeping soundly when I rose, and I did not wish to disturb him."

Saku caught his tone, and gathered that Raghunath had something on his mind. Probably some fresh trouble of Gunavati's making. It was a sore point with her that Sakaram still stuck to the dancing-girl; it was time he was past that kind of folly. But Saku knew that she could sooner expect him to cut off his right hand than to give up Lalita.

After finishing coffee, Saku went to the backyard to see to the hot water for the Athawars' bath. Good-humoured or cross, she took her duties seriously, the crosser the more seriously. On such occasions she tried to work off her ill-humour by putting in overtime and doing the work of the servants in addition to her own. Raghunath followed her, and found her commencing to clean a brass *chombu* with a piece of tamarind.

Doubtful in his own mind as to how to begin, he asked her what exactly she thought of the Swami.

"Which Swami?" asked Saku briskly.

"Munda Kadirvelu Swami of Benares fame."

"Certainly a designing scoundrel," replied Saku without hesitation.

"Was there any woman with him at Benares, *vahini* Saku?" asked Raghunath.

Saku puckered her eyebrows and thought for a second.

"I seem to remember there was some kind of woman mentioned, but I have no idea as to who or what exactly she was. Another of his victims, I suppose, poor wretched creature!"

"Had she anything to do with Vaman?"

Saku was taken aback. Vaman having anything to do with a woman! She held the brass *chombu* poised in her hands, and asked:

"How do you mean? Your brother is not the type which goes gallivanting with strange women. What's it all about? Please tell me."

Raghunath pondered for a while. It was a difficult story to relate to a lady, and that lady the wife of the man involved. Saku, growing nervous, deposited the *chombu* on the platform of the well and strained her ears to listen. Seeing Raghunath was silent, she said, "Tell me; why do you hesitate?"

But Raghunath would not answer. Saku became more urgent.

"What does it matter what it is? We are not children to be afraid of the workings of Fate."

Thus encouraged, Raghunath told her the whole story as Sakaram had related it to him. Saku listened without saying a word, her arms akimbo, her *sari* tucked up above the knee. When he had finished, he looked expectantly for her answer. He saw, even before she opened her mouth, that she did not believe a word of it.

"It's all nonsense. Sheer nonsense. Your brother photographed with a naked woman! Take it from me, Raghunath, it is a baseless, malicious slander. I wonder you believe it."

"I shouldn't believe it, *vahini* Saku, but how do you get over the photograph? Sakaram has seen it with his own eyes."

"Either Sakaram must have been dreaming or the photograph is a fraud," rapped out Saku.

"Sakaram has seen the photograph, and so has Lalita. Sakaram and I have been discussing it all night. Poor Sakaram went to sleep only at four in the morning—not that I had much sleep either."

"Well then, the photograph must be a fake."

Raghunath was touched by her faith, but, as he sorrowfully thought, her convictions could not alter the facts.

"Photographs aren't easy to fake, *vahini*. This photograph could not have been taken unless Vaman and the woman had been sitting side by side," he replied sadly.

Saku stood silently thinking; the working of her own mind was clear and direct. Her husband, she knew, was a blunderer, eaten up with love of money, tight-fisted, suspicious of every person who did not belong

to the family. But running after women was emphatically never in his line. Sakaram's story sounded to her crazy as a fairy tale. She said at last,

"There is no good speculating. Go and ask your brother directly. If there is anything in it, it will all come out. Your brother is not good at deception."

"I can't bring myself to ask him," replied Raghunath.

"Let me do it then," offered Saku readily. "That would be far better than making guesses in the dark."

Straightaway she went inside, and going up to Vaman, who was in the shrubbery, laughing over his illustrated paper, asked him if he had had anything to do with a woman at Benares.

Vaman looked as if he had been hit. The embarrassment in his face was interpreted by Raghunath as a confession of guilt.

"Why do you stare? What is the matter? If you have done anything foolish, it is better to speak out. Keeping things bottled up helps no one."

Vaman found his tongue. He replied feebly, "The Swami introduced her to me. He said she had mystic powers."

"And between them both they fooled you to the top of their bent," fumed Saku.

"But why rake up old matters? It's all over and done with."

To Raghunath's consternation, Saku suddenly burst into tears.

"What possessed you to do it? And at your time of life! With a wife and grown-up children, too!"

"I acted for the best. It was Girija Bai who manoeuvred me into it," wailed Vaman.

"The shameless woman! That she should turn procuress in her old age!" snorted Saku.

Vaman was faintly surprised at the use of the word 'procuress'; gaping, he heard his wife say,

"Was it for this you went to Benares? To add to the sins of a lifetime?"

"The sins were the Swami's. I, at any rate, was guiltless," protested Vaman, with dignified sorrow.

"Guiltless, indeed! Taking up with a prostitute!"

"Whoever said she was a prostitute?" asked the bemused Vaman.

"You seem to be quite ready to stand up for her! I wish you had as much consideration for your wedded wife."

A faint glimmering of his wife's meaning dawned upon Vaman.

"What are you thinking of, Saku?"

Raghunath intervened. "I shall explain, *vahini* Saku." And he proceeded to tell Vaman all that he had heard from Sakaram.

During the narration, Vaman listened in increasing wonder. His eyes seemed ready to start out of his head with surprise. At its conclusion he wailed, rather than explained, "It is all a lie, a cruel lie. I have been tricked into a false position. I never exchanged a word with that woman."

Saku's gasp of relief was almost painful. The surprise in her husband's face was too convincing to be regarded as feigned. Raghunath said gently,

"Tell us, Vaman. You had better tell us."

Vaman was only too willing. Feeling very sorry for himself, he told them of the buried treasure, the *Shakti puja,* and the photograph taken to act as a substitute for the semi-divine Dhumrakshi. His narration of the sordid story was so simple and straightforward that neither Saku nor Raghunath had any doubt that he was telling the absolute truth.

"But how happens it that the woman appears naked in the photograph?" enquired Raghunath.

"That's more than I can tell. Heaven knows I did not look in the woman's direction."

"I think I see it," hastened Saku to solve the problem. "Your brother must have been looking away from her, and at the moment when the photograph was actually taken, she must have thrown off her *sari,* and put it on again as soon as it was over."

Raghunath had no difficulty in believing that Saku's explanation was the right one. He heaved a sigh of relief. It was everything to him that Vaman was exonerated; fool he might have been, but of dishonourable conduct or infidelity to his wife he was innocent. At the moment, the Swami's threat and his evident ability to carry his point, receded into the background. Saku rose triumphant.

The question remained whether Gopinath should be told or not. Gopinath was not in the best of health nor in the best of spirits and Raghunath wondered how he would take it and was rather inclined to agree with Sakaram that they had better wait a little. But Saku cut into their conversation like a flail.

"How long can you keep it back from him? And what's there to keep back? This is a huge swindle and the sooner it is exposed the better."

They summoned Sakaram, and Gopinath was told. At first he listened in a dazed sort of way, unable to understand the drift of it all.

"What, a nude woman! Vaman photographed with her! Speak plainly, Raghunath. Are you dreaming?"

"No, *dada,* but Sakaram has seen the photograph with his own eyes. But Saku thinks Vaman has been cheated."

"That he has," instantly agreed Gopinath. "Vaman with a prostitute! Nonsense!" He laughed out aloud; then, remembering it was no laughing matter: "Poor, misguided Vaman! Ever so careful. Ever so discreet! It must have been that Girija devil that let him in for this."

They talked and talked, but for all their talking saw no way out of the horrible business but one. Raghunath voiced it.

"Let us buy him off. I mean, let Sakaram—"

Gopinath turned his melancholy eyes up to his half-brother.

"I am sorry, Sakaram, but that is the only thing to do and it would be right in any case. It isn't a very honourable thing for the Athawars to have their name associated with a dancing-girl."

Gopinath had never openly spoken to Sakaram about Lalita, but he had been acutely unhappy over his relations with her. And here was an opportunity to ask him to drop the disreputable connection. Yes, dis-

reputable; for clean-minded Gopinath had no use for dancing-girls be they ever so beautiful, ever so devoted.

Sakaram looked at his feet and made no answer.

"That would only scotch the snake, not kill it," commented Saku. "We must be done with this Swami once and for all."

Doubtless, they all thought; but how? It was then that Gopinath, struck with a bright idea, said:

"Look here, let us speak to Anantakrishna about it. He can help if anybody can."

"Yes, yes!" Saku agreed eagerly. He can deal with this pest and we want some strong official person to teach this serpent a lesson."

"Teach him a lesson! When he holds all the cards!" thought Raghunath. "However—there seems to be nothing else to do."

The next afternoon—a blazing afternoon of July—Gopinath and Raghunath left in their bullock *bandy* and made for Poppali where Anantakrishna was acting as District Collector. He had recently joined Poppali, the next-door district to Kedaram, and this was lucky as the Zamindari of Sendil was within his jurisdiction and Anantakrishna could act with official authority. Raghunath had begged Gopinath to stay behind at Athawar House but Gopinath refused to hear of it; the danger which threatened his family made him forget his ailment. Anantakrishna had been away in camp but had just returned and was glad and surprised to see Gopinath there with his brother. Gopinath rarely left Kedaram and incidentally this was the first time he had ever made a journey to visit Anantakrishna; in his honour, Anantakrishna cancelled all his engage-

ments and gave up the balance of the day to his friends.

After dinner, the brothers unfolded their tale, Raghunath doing the narrating, Gopinath intervening now and again with comments which were mostly exculpatory of Vaman. At first, Anantakrishna could not believe his ears. Vaman was the last person on earth he would ever have suspected of twilight adventures with naked women of disreputable character. He listened in patience; asked a few questions; wondered in his own mind whether this usually self-controlled being might not for once have made a thorough ass of himself. A little reflection, however, convinced him that this could not be. Taking everything together he was satisfied it was a barefaced, daring attempt at blackmail. That being so, he thought, the rest should be easy enough. He laid a reassurring hand on Gopinath's shoulder.

"Well, Gopinath, you had better leave it all to me. I shall get to the bottom of this."

Gopinath's eagerness was almost pitiful.

"We could ask Sakaram to give up Lalita; that we could, couldn't we, Raghunath?" he asked, turning to his brother. "I hate this dancing-girl connection, Anantakrishna. Only our names should not be dragged in the dust."

Anantakrishna laughed. "They will be if you try any half-measures. "What guarantee would you have that the Swami wouldn't start black-mailing again? No, I agree with Saku Bai, the snake must be killed. Now leave it all to me. You had better go in peace."

CHAPTER XXV.

Venkatramani had arrived in India in the cold weather of 1928 and had been sent to Chitragunta to learn his work under his father. That was Fawcett, the Chief Secretary's doing. Charles Fawcett had known Anantakrishna in the old days when he was a Tahsildar of promise, and when Anantakrishna's son reported himself to the Chief Secretary he received a most gratifying reception. Fawcett greeted him like an old friend and spoke freely to him about his stay in England, and the persons he had seen there, and generally took the new generation's measure. Fawcett who was a very keen judge of men was quite taken up with what he saw of Venkatramani.

"We shall have to look out a district for you" said Fawcett. "Have you any special preference?"

"None, sir, I don't mind where you send me. Thanks all the same."

"That's good. Let's see" said Fawcett and reaching down a Civil List ran over the names of the likely districts, commenting on their suitability.

"Gauthara, too far north; Ramsa, I don't very much care for; Kavutapur, not bad, but I think Baliga is going there; Parambanad, a nice district, Wellford is Collector, poor Wellford," and looking at Venkatramani, he chyked with the corners of his lips and Venkatramani gathered that Fawcett did not approve of Collector Wellford, who had the reputation of being queer. "Poppali, not at all a bad district, we may send

you there; Kedaram, a first-rate place, but I suppose it won't do, it is your own district, rather a pity for Sable is the Collector, a fine fellow and has a charming wife." Then looking a bit further up, he read, "Chitragunta, District Collector, Dewan Bahadur Anantakrishna Aiyar." Then, as a thought struck him, "What do you say to Chitragunta?" How would you like being 'larned' by your father? That would be jolly, wouldn't it?"

"I shouldn't mind, sir," replied Venkatramani. "But I don't know if my father wouldn't prefer me to be under somebody else."

"I don't see why he should. In fact, he ought to be jolly pleased to have the chance of teaching you the tricks of the trade. I think it will have to be Chitragunta. Go there for a bit and then we shall probably send you to Parambanad or Poppali."

Fawcett was at the height of his charm and Venkatramani was fascinated. That was the best of Fawcett; he treated Venkatramani like a human being and not as an abstract proposition in district administration.

To Chitragunta Venkatramani accordingly went and quickly discovered that being trained by his father was no joke. Anantakrishna kept him under very tight reins and put him through all his paces. Venkatramani secretly rebelled though he was all the time aware that he was receiving a far more thorough grounding than he would have got if he had been placed under any other officer. After six months Fawcett sent him to Parambanad. Lane, the Collector, was a Christ Church man himself and one of Fawcett's devoted admirers;

he took an instant liking to Venkatramani and asked him to 'pig' it with him in his own bungalow as Mrs. Lane was at home and there was a lot of room to spare in the house. But Venkatramani had not been at Parambanad three months when Lane was called away home and had to take leave. Kirby, a disagreeable-looking, pinched sort of person succeeded him and proved a disaster. During the six months that Venkatramani worked under him, he did not meet Kirby six times. Kirby had a pretty thorough-going dislike of his Indian assistants who, under the reformed constitution, were coming thick and fast upon his head. Palit, the head-quarters Sub-Collector, was very unhappy over Kirby's attitude; Palit spoke and thought as if he had been born in the I.C.S. and was worried and upset at Kirby's treatment of service Indians as if they belonged to another world. Palit liked to be on the best of terms with his officers and had so far got on fairly well with them; but this Kirby seemed to be blandly unaware of Palit's existence. Venkatramani did not in the least mind Kirby's Olympian attitude and was greatly amused by Palit's reactions to the man.

"You mustn't allow Kirby to get on your nerves, Palit. You ought to be damned glad he doesn't want your friendship."

"But, man," said an unconvinced Palit, "he is my officer and I should like to get on with him."

"Get on with him by all means but don't get near him. Treat him on a strictly business basis. That is what he will appreciate. I'm sure the love of our own kind, of Sastri, Ispahani and Kutumbiah will suffice for

you without your pining for the love of Octavius Jasper Mendelssohn Kirby."

"Is that his name?" gasped Palit, who never wrestled with the Christian names of his officers.

"It is. A sign that his Maker did not intend him for the company of his fellow-men."

Early in 1930 Venkatramani got a wholly unexpected shift to Gandindi. Branksome, who had been on home leave, had returned in the previous November and as Kavutapur happened to be vacant, he was sent there. He came to Madras for Christmas and meeting Fawcett had suggested that Venkatramani might be sent to his headquarter sub-division which was going vacant in February and Fawcett had agreed. The first intimation which Venkatramani had of the transfer was contained in a letter which Branksome sent him from Madras. He wrote, "Eileen and I are spending Christmas here with the Mosleys. How would you like coming to us at Gandindi? Old Purniah, my S.D.O. is going on leave in February, preparatory to retirement. We were lunching with the Chief Secretary yesterday and I suggested your being sent to Gandindi. Fawcett was amused and said something about poacher turning game-keeper to the very preserves he had once helped to rob. Still, he agreed and is submitting your name to His Excellency. Eileen is looking forward to your joining us and only hopes that the air of Gandindi will not make you give up your work as it once made you give up school!"

Venkatramani received this letter at Poppali where he was spending Christmas with his father. Anantakrishna's transfer to Poppali had just taken place and,

as Venkatramani's sub-division was just over the border, he met his father pretty frequently in camp and at headquarters. The idea of going back to Gandindi filled Venkatramani with delight but Anantakrishna merely shook his head. He thought that it was not a wise move to send his son to a place where he had cut his youthful capers and where his political friends might get him into embarrassing situations.

Venkatramani came to Kedaram for a few days before joining at Gandindi. Anantarama Aiyar, whose hold upon the things of this life was sensibly slackening, was longing for the company of his grandson as often as he could get it. They had many matters to talk about, the most important of them being the question of Venkatramani's marriage which was long overdue. Venkatramani was quite twenty-three and there was no excuse for his remaining single any longer. Indefinitely prolonged bachelorhood carried a stigma with it and was reprobated by public opinion. Once a young man's education was over it was his clear duty to marry and settle down to the life of a householder. That was what the sages had decreed and, as Anantarama Aiyar said pleadingly, it was his manifest duty to raise up seed to his ancestors and save them from hell-fire. Venkatramani, however, would not allow himself to be caught and skipped from one subject to another. He laughingly said that he had not yet lost his heart to anybody.

"You have lost your head, certainly," said Anantarama Aiyar affectionately, patting his grandson on the back. "I have always thought it was a mistake to have sent you to England. It has only resulted in making an Englishman of you."

"Made an Englishman of me!" exclaimed Venkatramani, surprised. "I thought, grandfather, in the old days you used to admire the English?"

"Yes, but in a strictly measured way. They stick to their *dharma*. We must stick to ours."

The Athawars gave Venkatramani a dinner before he left for Gandindi. They assembled in force to speed old Anantakrishna's son on his way to his new post. Gopinath, who was growing weaker and weaker every day, managed to join them at meals. Even Vaman shed his aloofness, fell into one of his boisterous moods and joked with unusual gusto.

"You must get married soon, Venkatramani. Time you began to breed babies," said Vaman and laughed at his own wit.

"You must first of all find a wife for me, uncle Vaman," replied Venkatramani.

"Find a wife for you! When you have the whole world to choose from! Why don't you marry Ramanatha Sastri's daughter?"

"My dear sir, she is not thirteen!"

"But she will soon be fifteen," continued Vaman readily. "And she is a fine-looking girl, too."

"You must marry in time, Venkatramani," said Gopinath, in a weak voice. "There is no excuse for your putting it off any longer."

"Quite so," agreed Vaman. "A boy should be married when he is about seventeen or eighteen."

"You have a son who is more than nineteen, I think. Why don't you get him married?" asked Venkatramani, trying to divert the talk.

Vaman was ready with his answer.

"Sona's marriage is the more pressing problem with us. She is fifteen and we are moving Heaven and earth to get her a bridegroom."

"Why trouble? I thought Heaven took the lead in these matters."

"Quite so, but in this case earthly effort is sadly lacking. Raghunath is absolutely indifferent."

"And defeats God's purpose. A regular non-co-operator is uncle Raghunath," remarked Venkatramani, with a smile.

"I think Sona's marriage is as good as settled," said Gopinath, communicatively.

"Is that so?" asked Venkatramani, a shade crossing his face. "Who is the lucky fellow?" he asked, trying to appear unconcerned.

Sona was bending over her leaf and Venkatramani, glancing towards her, saw nothing beyond an emerald pendant which hung from her ear. Sumitra Bai, serving fried *poppodams,* remarked jocularly:

"Look up, Sona. Time enough to be shy when the bridegroom comes in all his finery."

Sona made a petulant movement; talk of marriage discomposed her at all times and in Venkatramani's presence it seemed almost indecent.

"Raghunath's wife has got a nephew, a desirable lad. We have fixed on him," said Gopinath, in answer to Venkatramani's question.

"He is very well off and has heaps of money," said Vaman.

"And failed in his B.A." broke in Sona, and was instantly covered with confusion. She had been momentarily betrayed into candour on a subject on

which a girl was not supposed to be very explicit in stating her views.

"He is a very good-looking boy," said Raghunath's wife Santa, to restore the balance.

Vaman's younger son, Chimna, broke in mischievously:

"No, Sona does not think so. She doesn't like his nose."

Sona blushed violently and was very near tears.

Raghunath came to the rescue. "I say, Chimna, telling tales out of school! A fine confidante you are for a confiding cousin! Don't trust him, Sona."

"That was what Chimna himself said, and he now ascribes it to me," said Sona pouting.

"And you agreed, I suppose," said her father, good-humouredly.

Sona hung her head.

At the conclusion of the dinner, Raghunath took Venkatramani upstairs to his room. Sona's marriage was again the subject of discussion, which, however, was now carried on in a more serious spirit. Venkatramani understood, with a certain amount of relief, that Raghunath was not particularly pleased with the current proposal.

"He doesn't seem to be a particularly brainy lad, but, as Vaman says, he is very well off. He doesn't look very bright and Sona does not seem to fancy him greatly. However, he seems to be the best available."

"You speak haltingly. Why should you be in a hurry to get her married when Sona herself is not over-anxious for it? If you wait, somebody else may turn up, who may be more satisfactory."

Raghunath's face clouded.

"But who is to face the music, meanwhile? Already they call me a renegade for my supposed indifference. The family reputation is said to be in danger because we keep a grown-up girl unmarried."

"Grown-up girl," scoffed Venkatramani. "She is a mere child."

"That she is; I agree. But all the people at home have been making a dead set at me and there are already ructions in the family. I have retired from the contest and given them *carte blanche* to act in the matter."

At this point, Sona came in bringing *pansupari*. She had recovered her gaiety and Venkatramani tackled her on the subject of her marriage, playfully.

"I have been telling your father, Sona, not to let you marry in a hurry. You must continue your studies and keep your freedom while you may."

Sona went to her father's table and began turning over the pages of the *Hindu Weekly*. Noticing her shyness, Raghunath asked, "But if the fairy prince should turn up meanwhile?"

Venkatramani was ready with his answer.

"Come to terms with him and ask him to wait till Sona has done with college. How does she like school?"

"She is very happy there and she is fond of games, too."

"What a shame!" said Venkatramani, in mock derision.

"That's what Sadasiva Rao's wife, next door, told Aunt Sumitra," said Sona speaking for the first time since coming into the room. "Aunt was very much

hurt and recovered only when Aunt Saku said that Sadasiva Rao's wife was a mean-minded cat who would talk in a different key if her own daughter should do well at school."

Raghunath turned to Venkatramani.

"Now, look here, Venkatramani. What about you? I hear you are raising some difficulties about Ramanatha Sastri's daughter. Your father's mind is set upon that match."

Sona was watching Venkatramani through the corners of her eyes.

"But my father is not going to marry her," said Venkatramani, smiling.

Sona thought it a huge joke and laughed shyly.

"I thought your grandfather was going to speak to you about it and press you to marry the girl," said Raghunath.

"So he did, the dear old man, but I talked him out."

They dropped the subject of marriage and, Sona, relieved of her tongue-tied embarrassment, entered into the conversation with spirit. The time passed quickly till tea was brought at four. Gopinath, anxious to see a little more of Venkatramani, toddled in. Venkatramani, touched at the sight of his wan face, asked him in Marathi how he would like to see him marry a girl he did not want. Gopinath told him that he should hate to see him do it and complimented him on the ease with which he spoke Mahrathi.

"How I wish you were a *Desastha,* Venkatramani," he said. "One of our own people. The problem of Sona's marriage would not present any difficulty in that case. We would gladly marry her to you."

Gopinath's remark brought a smile to Raghunath's lips. Sona, not so flustered as might have been expected, looked at Venkatramani to see how he took it. He said, with cool self-possession:

"The wish might be turned into a horse, uncle Gopinath. These are the days of vanishing caste distinctions. Everybody says we must take a few steps forward."

"How nice it will be if the recommendations are carried out!" sighed Gopinath.

"It rests with ourselves, uncle Gopinath," said Venkatramani, with almost pontifical seriousness.

Gopinath was silent for a minute. He then said in a low voice:

"But there is the world to consider."

Venkatramani thought for a second and then said like one who had no doubts on the point, "The world is an ass."

CHAPTER XXVI.

When Anantakrishna once made up his mind he lost no time in getting to work. No half measures for him; this was a matter for the Police, for careful and expert investigation. The very day after the Athawars' visit he sent for Stent, his District Superintendent of Police and told him all about it.

"I want to get to the bottom of this, Stent. I am sure it is a huge hoax."

"So am I," readily agreed Stent. "In any case, a woman like that who agreed to sit for her photograph stark naked cannot be a paragon of virtue."

"I think so, too. Well, we must try and place her. The Swami is, by all accounts, a cunning devil and may be difficult to land."

Stent considered for a second.

"You say he has attached himself to young Sendil?"

"Yes. He seems to be a sort of spiritual adviser to the Zamindar."

"More likely a colleague in crime. Somehow he sounds familiar. There have been some queer doings lately at Sendil and a Swami has been mentioned. Certainly this is worth looking into for more reasons than one," said Stent, thoughtfully. "I think I'll put 79 on it. He is the man for it and if 79 can't light on anything useful, nobody else can. Let's have him round."

79 turned up in about a quarter of an hour. More formally, 79 was Kuppuswami Naidu, Sub-Inspector

of Police, serving in the Intelligence Branch of the Poppali District Police. He had entered as Constable No. 79 and had distinguished himself by uncommonly clever detective work. Promotion had come to him and, though he had become a Sub-Inspector and had frequently acted as an Inspector, he was still known to the Police and dreaded by the rest of the world as '79'. A scrawny creature, with a hazy face over which hovered a skimpy moustache, he shambled rather than walked into Anantakrishna's presence and limply raised his hand in a movement which passed for a salute. Anantakrishna felt an irresistible desire to laugh, but restrained himself. Stent spoke to 79 about the matter in hand and asked him if he knew anything about the Swami.

A slow smile spread over 79's face.

"He is very well known in this neighbourhood, sir. Reported to have wonderful powers."

"That doesn't help us very much. Do you think he would have played a dirty game like this?"

79 seemed to think for a minute, still smiling the vacuous grin that had driven many a D.S.P. mad during many a hot weather. He said:

"Just the man for it, sir. He would stage a murder if it paid him to do so."

Anantakrishna was getting almost excited.

"Is there anything definite known about the man?" he asked.

"Something is known, a good deal is suspected; but he rarely leaves any tracks behind." Then, turning to Stent, "He is very busy at the moment, sir, trying to create trouble between the Zamindar and his uncle."

"What has he been doing?" asked Stent.

"It is said he tried to hire a few people to cut off the uncle's head and stick it on a pole at the clearing of the Sendil forest."

"Have you reported that?"

"Yes, sir. I have just sent my report in."

"What's being done about it?" asked Stent, very excited. Here was a man talking coolly of attempted murder while apparently nothing was being done to bring the culprits to book.

"Nothing. Nothing can be done. No evidence," replied 79, as if that was all to be said about it.

Stent frowned, none too well pleased, "Well, what's to be done about *this?* Anything?"

"Certainly, sir. When the D.S.P. and the D.M. desire a thing should be done, it shall be. This photograph is very useful information, sir, and I am sure it will lead to something important."

"Can you guess who the woman could be?" asked Anantakrishna.

"If I could see the photograph I am almost certain I will recognise her. It must be one of his prostitute women—Nachi, Muthukannu, Dhanabagyam, Chittal—they're endless."

Anantakrishna smiled; 79's ready knowledge and evident coolness impressed him.

"Well, what are you going to do about it? Do you think of meeting the Swami yourself?" he said.

"I think I shall have to, sir."

"But won't that put him on his guard? You are quite a dreaded man, I find."

79 shuffled his feet with an embarrassed smile.

"It will be my business to put him off his guard, your honour."

"And how will you do that?"

"I have always been attracted to the *Saiva Siddhanta* system of philosophy. The Swami is a great exponent of that system and I am anxious to get some light from him. The Sub-Magistrate at Sendil is a great admirer of the Swami and he will introduce me to him."

"Who's the Sub-Magistrate at Sendil?" asked Stent.

"Mr. Bhima Rao."

"A relation of Chakradara's, you know, Stent. You remember old Chakradara Rao of Gandindi? They married sisters. Just the sort of fool to play into the hands of the Swami," explained Anantakrishna.

"I hope he will play into our hands for a change," said Stent. Presently he took 79 away and Anantakrishna sat thinking. "Strange that Gandindi should come into it again!" For his thoughts had been much in Gandindi that day—with Venkatramani and his troubles there.

Venkatramani had joined his new appointment at Gandindi and that under the most favourable omens. Word had already come that old Anantakrishna Aiyar's son, the schoolboy hero of the old non-co-operation days, was taking over and the lawyers mustered strong to give Venkatramani a welcome. There were quite a number of his old schoolfellows among them. Chowdhri, who used to keep wicket for the Gandindi eleven, had blossomed into a first-grade pleader and was already making headway, thanks to a father-in-law who led the criminal Bar of the District. Lakshman Doss was there in a stringy long coat of faded *khaddar*

and a heavy turban of the same material. Veeraswami Naidu, the senior lawyer present, made a speech welcoming Venkatramani and expressed his confidence that he would show in the discharge of his official duties the same independence and scorn of consequence which had distinguished him in his schoolboy days. Venkatramani, taken by surprise, inwardly cursed Lakshman Doss for this embarrassing demonstration; however, he contrived to pull himself together and mumble a few words of thanks. His obvious shyness and engaging modesty made a very good impression upon those present and the Gandindi Bar instantly voted that he had not been spoiled by his English education.

A few days later, Lakshman Doss had a petition to revise an adverse order by a subordinate magistrate in a petty case of assault. The matter did not take ten minutes to argue and Venkatramani passed orders there and then throwing it out. Lakshman Doss, who knew the weakness of his case, smiled pleasantly and was gathering his papers to leave when Venkatramani called him into his chamber for a small talk.

"It was very kind of you to have got up that welcome, Mr. Doss, though it was strictly unnecessary."

"Not at all, Mr. Venkatramani, it was the general wish. We are all so glad you have been posted to Gandindi."

"I am very glad myself. Since when have you been a *vakil*, Mr. Doss?"

"Since last July. I rejoined College in 1925 and graduated in 1927. Then I decided I would have a shot at the law and passed my B.L. last year."

"I suppose you find your work interesting. Lots of money to make, isn't there?" asked Venkatramani pleasantly.

"Interesting, yes. As for money, it is very shy. And the old men's monopoly," replied Doss, with premature bitterness.

"You will have your revenge, soon. You will be old yourself some day," comforted Venkatramani.

"I suppose so, but I want all the money I can make now. Politics is a frightfully costly business."

"I thought you didn't go in for politics nowadays, Mr. Doss."

"Not go in for politics! That's unthinkable. I am resting on my oars now. My objective is the Legislative Council, Mr. Venkatramani."

"Good," replied Venkatramani, cordially. "I am convinced that it is a more fruitful line to take than non-co-operation. How's Chakradara Rao?"

"Dead."

"Dead!" exclaimed Venkatramani. "He did not look like one that was going to die."

"I bet he didn't. He thought he was going to last for ever. All the same, he died two years ago leaving his affairs in an awful mess. His creditors had to be content with two annas in the rupee."

"I thought he was well off," said Venkatramani, mildly surprised. "How is his brother-in-law?"

"You mean Yadav Rao, the schoolmaster? He came to no good either, the weak-kneed idiot. He married again after his first wife's death but his second marriage did not turn out a success any more than his first."

"Where is his mother?"

"Not yet in Hell, I am sorry to say. Girija Bai is with her daughter, Chakradara Rao's wife."

Dining that evening with the Branksomes, Venkatramani reported the events of the day. Branksome listened with interest and said amusedly:

"So you seem to be in a fair way to become the darling of the crowd. I am rather glad that Lakshman Doss is turning out to be so sober and respectable."

"But Venkatramani must be careful. Doss might queer your pitch without your knowing it, Venkatramani," warned Mrs. Branksome.

Venkatramani shook his head. "He isn't that sort. Doss is a sportsman and will never play the dirty trick."

"I think he is a sensible fellow on the whole. But it won't do you any harm to be careful. There is a good deal in what Eileen says," said Branksome, thoughtfully.

"In any case, I hope your friend won't precipitate a riot. We do not want any riots in our time, do we, Venkatramani?" asked Mrs. Branksome.

"Oh, no. But if they come we can always meet them, Mrs. Branksome. Anyway, at the moment there is no danger of that."

"One never knows," said Branksome. "I think clouds are beginning to gather. I heard a bird whisper that old man Gandhi is planning a new move. Going to manufacture salt or something."

"Manufacture trouble, I expect, the tiresome old man that he is," said Mrs. Branksome.

Venkatramani's first few weeks at Gandindi passed without incident. Work was easy, men companionable and everything went according to plan. The political

barometer of the district was set fair. There was a certain amount of unrest in the country generally but so far, Gandindi had not been affected. In June, however, they began to encounter squally weather. Already, in March, Gandhi had launched his civil disobedience movement on the country and had inaugurated it by attacking the salt monopoly of Government. He had marched to the sea-coast, exhorting the people all along the route to break the salt law. Clad in a loin-cloth, staff in hand, he marched along followed by a ragged band of followers, the whole thing looking like an Old Testament picture come to life. It did seem a hare-brained venture and Gandhi was commonly supposed only to be adding to the gaiety of nations. Government, however, considered it as a direct challenge to authority and proceeded to deal with it accordingly; and early in May, Gandhi shared the fate of many of his lieutenants and was put away in jail.

At the news of this last indignity Lakshman Doss pricked up his ears and began to feel that the time had come for him to act. The Congress and local organisations connected with it had been declared to be unlawful but this did not deter him; he gathered together a few of his old friends and began to make plans for Gandindi's participation in the national struggle. As a first step, he decided to advertise a meeting to condemn the action of Government in incarcerating Gandhi and the other political leaders. The police got to know of these doings and Wilder, the District Superintendent of Police, spoke to Branksome about taking action. Branksome, who thought that Doss' bark was worse than his bite, counselled patience.

"I presume Doss only wants to relieve his feelings. A meeting is not likely to do any harm. A few people will just meet and beat the air and then disperse."

"Doss' record is against him and there is no guarantee that he won't proceed further. I think he is the one fellow here who can make mischief," said Wilder.

"If he does that we can easily jail him and put him out of mischief's way. But I don't think that Doss will proceed to extremes."

Lakshman Doss's meeting came off and proceeded according to schedule to pass solemn resolutions condemning the arrests and imprisonments. But this did not go far enough for many. Already Lakshman Doss was being charged by his friends with being supine; usually he bristled up like a porcupine whenever there was a call to action but now he was taking things not merely lying down but, as Chowdhri remarked, wallowing in mire like a buffalo. In point of fact, Doss was turning over in his mind alternative plans of action; he knew Gandindi was full of inflammable material; and he had only to light a spark and a regular prairie fire of agitation would ensue. Personally, he loved the noise and smoke of such demonstration. But now he hesitated—and for an odd reason.

"I shouldn't like to queer Venkatramani's pitch," he said, using the identical phrase, which Mrs. Branksome had used in her warning to Venkatramani.

"That should not be allowed to stay our hand, Doss," said Shenoi, his political colleague, disapprovingly.

"None is fonder of such heroics than I but there is Venkatramani to consider. We must back the boy up

and show that an Indian can manage a difficult district better than a white man," replied Doss.

"It will only be kindness wasted. Mr. Branksome will get all the *kudos*."

"Let him. I shouldn't mind in the least. Let Government know that a friendly fellow like Branksome can deliver the goods where some of those hot-heads make a mess of things."

Doss' ruling was accepted and the 'politicals' of Gandindi decided to lie low for the time being.

All this reached the ears of Branksome in a roundabout way and he was glad that Doss proposed to hold himself in check. He was, however, alive to the uncertainty of the position. "Things are moving too fast for my liking and I wonder how long these men will be allowed to keep their heads," he said to Mrs. Branksome.

Branksome was right. Reports began to arrive of disturbances in different parts of the country and of their being put down with severity. In June there was a terrible riot in Bombay and hair-raising accounts of the relentlessness with which the crowd was handled by the police were sent flying all over the country. Doss' being was all on fire and he swore he would hold himself in check no longer. He launched a vigorous propaganda for the boycott of foreign cloth, with picketing parties to prevent people from making purchases in the shops of the foreign cloth dealers. Eager bands of young men and women were posted at different points in the Gandindi bazaar and they planted themselves across the path of intending purchasers and tried to turn them from their purpose. And they did it with

effect. It was a direct violation of the Ordinance against picketing and Wilder, with the previous sanction of Branksome, took the matter in hand. Policemen with *lathis,* short brass-ferruled sticks of bamboo, were sent to keep order and to warn off the picketers. The picketing however did not stop and street skirmishing and *lathi* charges became the order of the day. Mutual recrimination ran high and the peace of the district was broken.

In due course Lakshman Doss and his friends Shenoi, Pandurang and Chowdhri were sent to jail for breaking the Ordinance against picketing. It was primarily Venkatramani's task to try the cases against them and Branksome, realising the awkwardness of his position, asked Venkatramani whether he would prefer the cases to be tried by somebody else.

"Assuredly not," said Venkatramani, without hesitation. "It is my job and I do not wish to shirk it."

Impervious to unpleasant talk and to pointed paragraphs in the local yellow press, he went to work with a will and gave the offenders the maximum terms open under the law; to do the picketers justice they took their sentences cheerfully. Lakshman Doss, standing up impudently in the dock, said, "Give me a good long one, Mr .Venkatramani; it won't hurt me and it will do you good with Government." Venkatramani with an unmoved face gave him six months; but as he left the Court his magisterial clerk saw that his hands were shaking.

But on the night when Chowdhri followed Lakshman Doss to jail, Branksome said to his wife,

"It's been almost worth it." And to the question, "What has?" he replied,

"All this trouble. It has been worth it just to show the stuff young Venkatramani's made of. He's been in a beastly position, he's had a horrible row to hoe and he's hoed it splendidly."

His wife asked him what else he had expected.

CHAPTER XXVII.

When 79 came at last and made his report, Anantakrishna felt that the moment had arrived when he could strike. 79 had been busy; quietly, without any fuss, he had delved into the Swami's past history and unearthed one or two incidents which bore a striking resemblance to the Benares adventure of Vaman. Once indeed the enemy had actually been caught tripping, but he had been saved from exposure by an infatuated acolyte—Bhima Rao—the present Sub-Magistrate at Sendil, through whose innocent agency 79 now contrived to get himself introduced to the Swami. The Swami had been cautious at first, being naturally suspicious of policemen in plain clothes, but Bhima Rao spoke highly in praise of 79 as an able police officer of the old school who had, at the same time, a definite bent towards religion and philosophy. And 79 was so undistinguished-looking and so palpably earnest in his desire for enlightenment that, after the first few days, the Swami warmed to him and talked to him with a good deal of freedom. And 79 conducted himself becomingly. Never did he, by sign or word, show any curiosity as to the Swami's doings in the present; he talked all the time about life in this world and the next, the doctrine of *karma,* the cleansing qualities of the Ganges at Benares and other matters with which the orthodox concern themselves; and under this cloak he succeeded in gaining useful information relating to the Swami's movements about the time he was in Benares.

79 sent his emissaries round and learned that Dhanabagyam, the derelict dancing-girl of Mel-Poppali and an old flame of the Swami's, had also been to Benares on a pilgrimage about the same time. In his own mind, 79 was convinced that the woman in the photograph must be Dhanabagyam or one of her sisters. He made his report to Stent, who passed it on to Anantakrishna and the three of them met in conference to discuss the best method of bringing the Swami to heel.

"The worst of it is, there is no evidence on which we can take any action against him," commented Stent. "He is, apparently, too cunning a devil to leave any traces behind. Some day he is sure to be caught."

"That isn't much consolation," said Anantakrishna. "He has had a damned long innings. Meanwhile, I want to save my friends, the Athawars, from being blackmailed."

"Why don't they defy him? I am quite certain he is merely trading on their fears. From what you say, they are a simple-minded lot and just the right kind of victims for a scoundrel like this. If they show fight, I am sure the Swami will retreat in disorder."

"That's easier said than done. They will die of fright if you suggest anything like that. The very thought of publicity would finish them."

"Then there's nothing that we can do in the matter, I am afraid," said Stent, disappointedly. "I want the Swami prosecuted for extortion—for trying to blackmail. Your friend, Vaman Janardhan, could help to this man in jail."

"I can't fancy Vaman Janardhan in the witness box. He won't go into it, and even if he does he will prove a broken reed."

They sat awhile in silence which Anantakrishna broke.

"I think I shall send for the man, Stent, and give him a talking to."

"Suppose he stands up against it?"

"I don't think he will. He won't risk official disfavour. It will be as much as his influence is worth."

"Let me give you a tip, then. 79 tells me, and so do the local police, that the Swami has been organising a few midnight raids on the property of Sendil's uncle. We haven't evidence upon which we can take action; but if you can't bluff him on that, you can't on anything else."

"That should be my line. Now, Stent, could you walk in towards the end of the proceedings? We can see if we can't make the man deliver up the photograph?"

"I'm game. I should love to see this wonderful holy man at close quarters and his reactions to the District Magistrate."

At Sendil the Swami was produced in less than an hour. Stent's messenger had found him at his devotions and, as anticipated, the Swami played for time and offered to meet the District Magistrate later in the day. But the Inspector was respectful but firm. The Swami ceased his devotions and came.

The sight of a number of policemen in uniform unnerved the Swami completely. He had no idea why he had been sent for; he knew that there had been trouble

at Sendil of his making, but fancied they could not suspect what part he played. The suspense was very trying and the Swami repeatedly wiped his brow.

At the end of an hour's waiting, which had thoroughly demoralised him, the Swami was called in. Anantakrishna had changed his mind about Stent and asked to be present from the start. Stent sat cross-legged in a camp chair in khaki shorts and Sam Browne belt, smoking a pipe and looking at the Swami through the corners of his eyes. Anantakrishna in long trousers and a sports shirt was standing as the Swami came in. He looked a masterful figure with his great height and muscular build. The Swami inclined his head by way of salutation and Anantakrishna motioned him to sit. Ignoring him for the moment, he addressed some remarks to Stent; then he addressed the Swami, pleasantly enough.

"How long has the Swami been at Sendil?"

"The Swami used to visit it frequently in the old days. He was away for some years. He returned but recently," replied the Swami.

"I understand you have been here for three or four years, now?"

"Not three or four years. About two or three, I think."

"Very meticulous!" (This in a stage whisper to Stent in English). "Oh, I may be wrong. Two or three years. What was it I said? Three or four, was it?"

The Swami fidgeted.

"I come and go. The Swami has business elsewhere."

Doubtless, all over the country, I expect—from Rameswaram to Benares, eh?"

"The Swami travels a good deal."

"So I hear," said Anantakrishna meaningly. "But what business has the Swami at Sendil at present?"

"Nothing much. The Swami knew the old Zamindar. The present Zamindar wants his services to perform certain expiatory ceremonies."

"Expiatory or propitiatory?" And without waiting for the answer, he turned to Stent and asked, "Do you know the difference, Stent?"

Stent shook a determined head. Anantakrishna went back to the Swami:

"Do these involve midnight raids on the uncle's estate next door?"

There was a faint glint in Anantakrishna's eye, which the Swami intercepted. He tried to look as if he didn't understand.

"You don't understand, do you? Are you sure you don't?"

"I don't— I don't!" stammered the Swami.

"It is difficult for me to believe that a Swami of your perception can't understand this simple thing. Well, I won't keep you nay longer in suspense. I hear very damaging reports about you, from the Police. The *dorai* here (inclining his head in the direction of Stent) says you are a public danger."

The Swami cast a look of mingled respect and reproof in the direction of the District Superintendent of Police.

"The *dorai* must be misinformed. Any official hereabouts may be asked. The Sub-Magistrate, the

Inspector, Mr. 79—" A smile was exchanged between Anantakrishna and Stent, which the Swami noticed with a start.

"Finish the sentence, Swami. If all these people agree you are harmless, then there can be no doubt you are such. But are you sure—?"

The Swami felt Anantakrishna's gaze burning through him. He shuffled his feet.

"People may have spoken out of enmity and jealousy. You should not believe it."

"So you have enemies, then?"

"None that I know of. Still—"

"Still, you impeach their testimony. That's hardly convincing. Well, there are many charges against you."

"Of what nature may I ask?" The Swami's voice had sunk to a whisper.

"Very varied, I am afraid. Extortion, intimidation, blackmail, assault, instigation of murder. Anything else, Mr. Stent?"

"These cover most of his activities, sir."

"Well?" He looked fixedly at the Swami, who seemed unable to find his tongue.

"It must be my misfortune that you are so informed. I am in your hands. A careful enquiry will show that I have nothing to answer for."

"I hope so. Meanwhile, I am afraid I must order your belongings to be searched."

The Swami's ash-besmeared face turned more ashen.

"I have few belongings, as the master must know. There is nothing in them, nothing to search."

"I believe you. I don't suppose you keep tell-tale things there. Still, it is a formality, and one never knows, we may find something."

The Swami was obviously uncomfortable. The search itself had no terrors for him; he was sure that nothing could be discovered; of evidence of his plotting, the police would never get a shred from his belongings. Habitually he travelled light—a steel trunk sufficed for his needs and anything vital or damaging was not in it. But the indignity of a public search! That would be the end of him. Here he was, a holy man of enormous power, respected and feared by the neighbourhood—and to have his belongings searched as if he were a runaway cooly, a common felon! Worse,—and his blood became cold at the thought—who knew what the Police would be up to? There might be a bogus recovery. The Police were known to be up to that sort of thing. They might introduce some article, a forged letter, a blood-stained rag, or some other diabolical device to connect him with some crime or other. Oh, God! Altogether it was a frightful prospect. But what was it they were after? What was the charge against him? Could he ask for particulars? Slowly he found his tongue.

"It is not fair to condemn a person without due inquiry. The master knows that."

"Of course. You are not condemned yet, though I am pretty sure you soon will be. A search is only part of the inquiry for which you plead."

Anantakrishna's composure was playing havoc with the Swami's own.

"Still, a public search conducted under the master's

orders, would be tantamount to a condemnation. I have hardly deserved it."

"I am sorry, but there seems to be no alternative."

"May I ask—?" said the Swami, beseechingly.

"Yes?"

"What is it that the master expects to find in my trunk?"

"Evidence of many things."

"I can show my trunk. There is nothing in it except my robes, my *cadjan* leaves and a few odds and ends."

"We would like to have a look at them, and if we don't find what we want, we shall have the Zamindar's house searched."

"What has he done?" asked the Swami, horrified.

"Employed you," answered Anantakrishna, coolly.

"Is that a crime?" The Swami was on pins.

"Yes, in view of the purpose of the employment."

"I beg the master's pardon for seeming to question his views. Is it wrong to consult a holy man in spiritual matters?"

"Holy man, be hanged!" muttered Stent, with an evil look.

"Is it right to employ a holy man to suggest cutting an uncle's head and sticking it on a tree in Sendil forest?" said Anantakrishna, sternly.

The Swami gazed in simulated horror.

"Or to suggest midnight raids on the uncle's property?"

"It is all false. There is not a word of truth in it."

"Or to tout for dancing-girls for the Zamindar?"

Taken aback, the Swami affected surprise convincingly.

"To intimidate people; to blackmail them?" continued Anantakrishna, fiercely.

"I don't understand," said the Swami, maintaining his air of startled surprise.

Anantakrishna lost his temper. He burst out:

"You don't understand! You designing scoundrel! Trying to throw dust in my eyes!" Then, turning to Stent: "Place this fellow under arrest, Mr. Stent. Clap him in the lock-up, this ash-besmeared, crafty rogue. We will teach him what it is to play his confounded tricks upon innocent people in Benares, taking nude photographs of prostitutes and using them to act as procurer to a blasted fool of a Zamindar. Is your Inspector here?"

"Yes." And Stent rose.

The Swami knew no English but he caught a few words which completely unnerved him. Benares—photographs—fool—Zamindar. The Swami remembered—the District Magistrate was a great friend of the Athawars; they must have told. Anantakrishna had a personal interest in the matter and he would use all his power to ruin the Swami. Swami, indeed, thought the wretched Swami, I've been an utter fool! His trunk certainly contained nothing relating to his other activities, but the photograph was there, negative and all. An inspiration came to him. He said:

"The master must not be angry with this poor worm. There is some mention of Benares. May I ask what the master is thinking of?"

"As if you don't know!" said Anantakrishna scorn

fully. "Trapping men into being photographed with prostitutes and blackmailing them afterwards."

"That comes of friendly interference. The Swami only tried to help a good man who was being pursued—"

"Shut up," rapped out Anantakrishna. "You save a man by threatening to use that nasty photograph."

"My sole idea was—"

Anantakrishna turned round. "Stop all that balderdash, please. Where is that photograph?"

"I shall hand it to the master. I can't prove my good faith better. I shall go home and send it."

"No. Send for it. You don't leave this room until you have done so."

The Inspector was despatched for the Swami's trunk. It was opened in the presence of Anantakrishna and Stent. The negative lay at the bottom of the trunk, wrapped in a rag. Anantakrishna looked at it as it lay on the table.

"Are you sure you have no other belongings?" asked Anantakrishna, still keeping up his air of cold authority.

"Nothing, except a small box containing the deity to which I offer worship."

Anantakrishna conferred for a moment; then said: "You may go now. I shall send for you later. Ask your Inspector to have an eye on him, Mr. Stent. This man needs watching."

With an obeisance as deep as he had ever made to any deity—accompanied by a singularly unholy look, the Swami went.

79, who had been in the background, was sent for

and asked if he could identify the woman in the picture. In an instant, he said:

"It is Dhanabagyam, the dancing-girl. She died a year ago."

Relieved, Anantakrishna turned to Stent and said:

"Not a bad piece of work, is it? Thank you, 79, thank you very much indeed."

79 gave his limp salute and dropped away to the verandah.

"I think," said Anantakrishna, "that that is the end of Vaman Janardhan's troubles".

"And I think," said Stent, "it is the end of Munda Kadirvelu Swami. In these parts anyway."

Stent was right; for when the Inspector enquired at Sendil next morning for the Swami, lo! he had been called away in the night; and to what destination and whether by God or man, none at Sendil knew.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

The Athawars had planned a pilgrimage to Tirupati and a visit to Gandindi *en route* in June but they had not been able to carry out their intentions. Sona's marriage had not come off, the Mysore people having suddenly developed certain objections to her on the ground that her age had passed the orthodox limit. A year before, she had been a coveted prize; but the lapse of twelve months had made all the difference. The Athawars had hunted high and low for another bridegroom but they had not been successful, the one or two who were available being completely unsuitable. For the first time in his easy-going life Raghunath was heavy at heart; he went about depressed and moody, weighed down by the burden of an unwedded daughter.

Atmaram Sait's bond had fallen due and the Athawars found themselves in a cleft stick. The regular payment of interest had taxed them severely and they had not the ghost of a notion where they were going to find the thirty thousand rupees and more of principal. Atmaram Sait, they knew, would give them no quarter but would rush into court with his claim and bring the Athawar lands to sale without delay. By monumental efforts they raised half the sum due and going down on their knees had begged the Sait to give them another six months, and to this he had agreed after stipulating for enhanced interest. Grateful for the respite allowed, the Athawars cast about for ways and means but there seemed to be no way out. A

wholly unexpected crash of certain well-known Chetty firms in Burma had stiffened the South Indian money market; the Athawars resigned themselves to their fate, hoping to make what they could from the interval which must necessarily elapse before their lands could be knocked down in Court sale.

They made nothing and Gopinath decided that some means must be found to pay Atmaram. He summoned a family conference and suggested that a part of the family lands should be sold and that the price realised should be paid to Atmaram before asking for further time. Atmaram, humbled by his own misfortunes and the failure of his scheme in regard to Lalita, had sent a courteous intimation that he was financially in low water and that he would be grateful for any payment which the Athawars might make; further, he came down to Athawar House one day and gave them a suggestion. A neighbouring landowner who had recently acquired some landed property at Syamalapuri was trying to consolidate his holding by purchasing the adjoining land. Aunt Tholasi's marriage portion was a straggling stretch of land which ran right in the middle of the fields in question and Atmaram was sure that the landowner would be willing to pay a fair price for it. This he knew, would not suffice to cover his dues and Atmaram therefore suggested that as much of the lands of the Athawars as lay contiguous to Aunt Tholasi's property and whose value would make up the deficit might also be sold at the same time. The course appeared inevitable; yet Aunt Tholasi's misery was hard to witness.

"I did not want the lands to pass out of the family,

Gopinath," she said in a weak voice. "I had hoped that they would come back to you when I died."

"Don't worry, *athya,* our luck will turn and all that we are selling will come back to us some day, if it please God."

Gopinath was an optimist to the last.

The transaction was put through and the Athawars breathed freely. Vaman, alone of the family, went into mourning over the loss of the lands which he, with habitual ungraciousness, put down to the improvidence of his brothers. Nobody minded him, however; Atmaram, though he had been foiled in his original purpose of buying up the extensive Athawar lands, was not sorry; times had changed, land-values had depreciated and, in his own district, land-cesses were eating up the landholder; ready money was at a premium and he began to regard it as a mercy that the Athawars had paid him his dues without saddling him with the land. He gave them a receipt for the money and returned the mortgage bond with an endorsement that it was discharged in full. He had the grace to congratulate the Athawars on their emergence from the very trying period they had been through without a scratch. "Thank you for the money, Gopinath Punt," he said. "I am really glad the debt hasn't broken you. The Athawars have always been righteous and God-fearing and, as such, will never be forsaken by God. Those who try a fall with you will come to no good. God bless you all."

Gopinath, honourable to the last, insisted on the Athawars passing a document to Tholasi Bai giving her about a hundred acres of their land in exchange for

what she had conveyed to Atmaram towards the discharge of the Athawar debt. Once this was done and Atmaram gone for good, a new happiness filled the hearts of Gopinath and all the family with the solitary exception of Vaman. He considered himself a very ill-used person and muttered menacingly of partitioning the family properties and setting up a separate home for himself. These threats, however, came to nothing; they only introduced a new element of strain between the brothers which it required all the tact of Aunt Tholasi to prevent from becoming a corroding influence.

In June 1932 the Athawars took stock of their position; it was clear that they were not yet out of the wood. Sakaram, freed from the fear which had once threatened to separate him from his beloved Lalita, now devoted himself entirely to her. His family thought that he had had a sufficiently long innings with her and that it was more than time that he settled down into a respectable mode of life and conformed to right standards of conduct. Sakaram thought otherwise. The affair again threatened to drag the Athawars into a much-dreaded publicity, for Kamakshi Bai, they heard, refused to come to terms and was proposing to put her claim for maintenance into court.

But there was a problem even more urgent which still confronted the family; Sona was yet unmarried. When the Mysore proposal fell through there had not been much time left that year to look out for another bridegroom. When the marriage season was past they had to wait till the next year but then Sona had an attack of enteric fever. This year again they had

made desperate efforts and hunted high and low in search of a suitable bridegroom but all their efforts had been unavailing. No fairy prince had so far appeared; even the drab heroes of the marrying world had not sought Sona's hand. Earlier in the year, one or two suitors had appeared who seemed suitable; they had got even so far as comparing horoscopes, but when it came to final settlement, they shied away. Backboneless, unable to defy convention and their elders, they merely sent up a sigh and passed Sona by. It seemed, therefore, that for all her sweetness, Sona was fated to 'languish under the virgin thorn'; the only mercy was that she was thoroughly unaware and undisturbed by what appeared to be her obvious fate. Remorse at her unwedded condition was the exclusive portion of her sorrowing relatives; Gopinath, tossing on his sick bed, was vexed beyond measure, Aunt Tholasi acutely unhappy, while Raghunath's wife, Santa, was in the very extreme of misery. Even Raghunath, usually so regardless of convention, yielded to the prevalent feeling.

The Athawars puzzled over the reason for the fall in their stock; once, people came from far and near, anxious to be honoured with an alliance with that distinguished family. What had happened to them now that they should be treated as outcasts? "Was it divine wrath?" they asked themselves. But they knew they had not consciously offended against the laws of God or man. Aunt Tholasi, speaking feebly, advised them not to repine, but to throw the burden on God and look out for a suitable match. Raghunath should make a pilgrimage with his wife and daughter to Tirupati;

the family was in arrear with their visit to the Lord of the Seven Hills. Let them worship at His shrine and pray to be shown a way out of their difficulties and all would yet be well. Aunt Tholasi's strong and sustaining counsel had helped them to round many a corner before and they readily fell in with her suggestion.

Sona had sat for her Intermediate examination and was spending the vacation reading what she liked to her heart's content; and, early in June, Raghunath left for Tirupati accompanied by his wife and daughter. On their way back, they halted at Gandindi for a day. Gandindi was out of their way, but Raghunath was a visit in Venkatramani's debt and he was also seized with the feeling to have a look at the house where Susila had met her end. Sona, who had loved her aunt with the fervour of a first devotion, was equally eager to see the home where that aunt had lived and died. Sona was not yet a self-analyst; if she had been she would have realised that, low down in the recesses of her heart, the chance of seeing Venkatramani in his own house was an equally compelling, though hardly conscious, motive.

Venkatramani received them at the station and drove them home in his car. Sona was struck by his easy management of the car and the deference paid to him by people all along the route. Raghunath took her to visit Girija Bai. He had been in two minds as to the wisdom of calling on the old woman; he would have taken Sona quietly to the Brahmin quarter and shown her Susila's house from the outside. But his wife, overpowered by curiosity, suggested calling on Girija Bai. Girija, who had aged considerably and had lost

much of her venom, was taken by surprise; yet seemed genuinely pleased to see them. Misfortune had toned and tempered her and she shed a real tear in memory of Susila. She hung about the necks of Sona and her mother and sobbed like a child thinking of all that she had lost and it was with difficulty that Raghunath was able to get away from her.

The next day Venkatramani organised a picnic to the cave temple which had recently been discovered in the heart of the *Gowdamahals*. It was a small hall cut into the side of the *Lavagiris* and its walls were covered with frescoes which were of the same period as the paintings at Ajanta and Ellora. Some of the figures were remarkably fresh, the most striking being the head of Mahendra Varma and his Queen. Venkatramani explained the symbolic ornamentation with the enthusiasm of a skilled antiquarian and Sona listened with rapt attention. He was struck by her intelligent appreciation of what he was saying and insisted on driving them on to a hamlet a few miles further afield to show her a frieze of elephants at play, carved on the side of a hill.

Arrived there, Venkatramani found his friends, the Chatterjis, already established on a ledge of rock for the day. Chatterji, who had been at Oxford with Venkatramani, was now in the Forests and he had come with his wife, a girl from the United Provinces. They invited Venkatramani to share their meals with them. Raghunath had conscientious objections to dining outside his caste, and so had his wife, but they compromised by taking fruit and milk at the hands of the Chatterjis. Mrs. Chatterji, a kind-hearted simple

woman, soon captured the hearts of the Athawars. Courteous questioning as to the state of their respective families followed and Mrs. Chatterji discovered with a surprise that Sona was unmarried.

"Isn't it unusual to keep girls unmarried so long?" she asked, in surprised gladness.

Her husband, who liked to keep up appearances, remonstrated kindly with his wife. "You have no right to ask, my dear. You were not married till you were twenty-two."

Mrs. Chatterji laughed. "And married outside my caste, too. That's why I can ask freely and without any suspicion of feeling superior."

Raghunath and his wife proceeded to tell them how they were not responsible for Sona's condition, but Mrs. Chatterji cut them short. "There is no need to be apologetic, Mr. Raghunatha Rao. I think it's all for the best." Then, turning to Venkatramani, she asked, "I say, Venkatramani, what's the matter with people in your country that they have no eyes for such a charming girl as your friend, Sona Bai?"

Venkatramani's eyes beamed with pleasure. Here was an opening and he took it.

"We have eyes to see and covet, Mrs. Chatterji, but people do not seem to appreciate that. It is only the twinkle of a Mahratta eye which will pass muster with the family."

Sona looked away; Raghunath fidgetted uneasily. Santa Bai, rising to the occasion, said, "We are the slaves of custom which binds and shackles us mercilessly."

"I'm afraid it is the other way round, Santa Bai.

I think it is we who enslave custom and harness it to our weaknesses. Here am I, who defied custom and married this unappreciative Bengali, and we do not appear to have made a hash of our marriage."

She pushed Chatterji and he rolled over on the rock, saying laughingly, "This is what I get in return for having married her."

The Athawars caught their gay mood and smiled genially; but in Raghunath's face the smile presently died.

On their way back Venkatramani felt triumphant. He had watched Sona closely while Mrs. Chatterji talked and the light of pleasure and the sweet smile which had lit up Sona's face held their own meaning for him.

The next day, Venkatramani and Raghunath had a quiet talk in Venkatramani's office-room. Venkatramani was trying to persuade Raghunath to stay for another day but Raghunath shook his head sadly and said:

"I have got to get back, Venkatramani. I must return and resume the hunt. The marriage season is approaching its end and I must make another effort. Jeswant writes that there is a young man employed in the Mysore railways and that he may be suitable."

"Is he suitable?" asked Venkatramani, grimly.

"From all that I can gather, he is not. Oh, you do not know, Venkatramani, how very much worried I am."

Venkatramani appeared lost in thought. He then said, in tones of deliberation:

"Are not our worries mostly of our own making,

kaka? We seem to enjoy manufacturing hair-shirts for our own wear."

"The hair-shirt is an heirloom, handed down by our fathers. We have not only got to wear them but worship them. Oh! what a farce is life!"

Venkatramani fidgetted in his chair. He was doing a certain amount of hard thinking. Hardly knowing how to set about it, he managed at last to speak out.

"I hope you will excuse my seeming impertinence, *kaka* Raghunath. In any case, I hope you won't misunderstand my motives. I want to talk to you about Sona. I suppose you can guess what is passing in my mind. I want her for myself. Now, there it is. I have said it and if you feel scandalised, explode for all you are worth and curse me to the top of your bent. But, *kaka,* I have thought about the matter seriously and if you can only bring yourself to give her to me I shall try and make her happy."

Raghunath was silent for what to Venkatramani seemed an age.

"Have you spoken to Sona?" he asked in a low voice.

Venkatramani was horrified.

"Heavens, no, *kaka!* I wouldn't take such a mean advantage. I do not know, however, but she may guess my feelings towards her. But anyway let me assure you that I have not given her any indication, at all events, not consciously, of what I feel."

Raghunath lapsed into silence again. It was evident he was battling with his emotions. He said, slowly and deliberately:

"I wish I could give her to you. I would gladly give her to you in preference to any other man on earth.

When you were both young your mother and my wife used to plan your marriage in joke. I should be happy if what was said in joke turned out to be true in fact. I shall speak to my brothers about this idea of yours. I shall also put it to your father. I am afraid, however, my dear boy, that it is going to be a very rough sailing. I see a number of rocks ahead."

At that moment, Raghunath's wife called her husband in to solve some difficulty about the packing. He went inside and in a few minutes sent Sona to fetch a quantity of packing string from Venkatramani. When she came, Venkatramani was reading a letter which had just come from Mrs. Chatterji inviting him and the Athawars to tea. He read out the letter to Sona and asked her what the answer was to be. She blushed and said:

"You must ask father, but I wonder if he will agree to stay. I think he is bent on leaving by the five o'clock train."

"Would you mind, Sona, if your father should be willing?"

"No. I should love to stay. Mrs. Chatterji is such a sweet woman," replied Sona, and held up her face to Venkatramani's.

Venkatramani's impulse was to gather her into his arms and cover her face with kisses. The delicate scent of her jasmine-scented tresses was already mounting to his head. He knew how the men of the West paid their court to the women they loved and Venkatramani would have given anything at that moment to follow the western way, to take her in his arms and whisper words of love in her ears. But he knew that to do

so would be an outrage upon Hindu notions of dealing with a maiden, and he knew further that it would be the surest means of frightening his sweet and trusting Sona.

Her mother, impatient at the delay, came and dragged Sona away. At the door, however, she turned back to look at Venkatramani and this look of hers sustained him during the months to come.

Restored to Kedaram, Raghunath kept his own counsel till the end of the marriage season which was already in sight. The young man recommended by Gopinath's son-in-law proved impossible and the season passed without any improvement in the position. It was then that Raghunath unburdened himself to his family. When he suggested considering Venkatramani for Sona's hand, the Athawars were speechless with amazement. Gopinath, usually so imperturbable, thought that Raghunath had gone off his head. As for Vaman, he declared with wide-mouthed horror, that if the proposal should be so much as mentioned again he would leave the family and go forth, a wanderer on the face of the earth. The ladies of the household ranged themselves in massed opposition to the idea. Curiously enough, it was Sakaram who told them that it was the most sensible proposal which had so far arisen for consideration; but Sakaram's very support of the idea was conclusive proof to the family of its hare-brained character.

Raghunath dropped the subject. He was busy making his own plans and he made up his mind that whatever might come of his present idea, he was not going to wreck his daughter's life on the rock of custom. He

was waiting for an opportunity to raise the question before Anantakrishna, but Vaman forestalled him. Anantakrishna was transferred to the city of Madras in the cold weather having been appointed a Secretary to Government and he passed through Kedaram where he stayed for a couple of days before joining his appointment. There Vaman called on him and told him of the madness which seemed to have come over Venkatramani and Raghunath. He came like one certain of agreement in condemnation of so wild a proposal—so certain, that he defeated his own ends. Anantakrishna did not like the malevolence with which Vaman ridiculed the idea; he decided that, whatever might be his own views on the matter, he wasn't going to pay Vaman the compliment of agreeing with him. He told him, almost brusquely:

"I do not at all agree with you, Vaman. What's wrong with the proposal? Do you consider that your family is so far above ours that a union between the two is unthinkable?"

Vaman was dumbfounded. He had no thoughts of any difference in family status. He was only thinking of the violent break with custom involved in the union of a Mahratta Brahmin girl with a young man of the Tamil community. But Anantakrishna—who thought that Vaman with his shoddy adventures had no right to express himself so vigorously on a matter which, after all, primarily concerned his brother, Raghunath—would give him no quarter. Vaman returned moody and dejected and certain in his own mind that between Raghunath and Anantakrishna the Athawars would soon be dragged in the mire. And with such doleful

imaginings Vaman contrived to make himself a trial to himself and the rest of the family.

Raghunath met Anantakrishna and talked it over with him. Anantakrishna made no secret of the fact that he viewed the proposal with disfavour. His official mind declined to have any truck with anything in the nature of idealism. As in matters of administration he followed the path of precedent milestoned with Government Orders and Departmental Rules so, in all things concerning his family life, he preferred the ways of his forefathers. Yet there was a strong strain of practical common sense in him which made him chafe at his impotence to do what did seem to him so very right in spite of what age-long practice ordained.

He discussed the question with Anantarama Aiyar and father and son found themselves in rare agreement. Anantakrishna, however, could not help asking his father, in a purely academic spirit, what was wrong with the proposal. Anantarama Aiyar, whose notions of right and wrong conduct were still unaffected by too narrow an interpretation of the Scriptures, answered:

"There is nothing wrong in it. After all, we are both Brahmins and a union between two families will not be repugnant to the literal word of our Scriptures. But custom has its own claim to respect. It is the crystallised wisdom of the ages and tinkering with it is a risky business. Safety lies in following the well-worn path."

Anantakrishna knew what Venkatramani's answer would have been. He would have said that the safety advocated was the ideal of the frog in the well and

that he vastly preferred to take his life in his own hands and make what he could of it. Anantakrishna had heard his son deliver himself of similar nobilities and had rarely vouchsafed an answer. Now he asked himself, "Was that because I didn't know one? Is *that* an answer? Or is the boy right?"

CHAPTER XXIX.

One of Gopinath's minor satisfactions in settling Atmaram's claim lay in the fact that he had successfully eluded the law courts. He had a deep-rooted distrust of the law; but at the very moment when he was congratulating himself upon steering clear of it, a new enemy appeared on the horizon. Kamakshi Bai, it will be remembered, had sent Sakaram Rao a notice for restitution of conjugal rights and, in the alternative for maintenance. Sakaram had ignored the notice and Kamakshi Bai, after lying low for a time, now filed an action for maintenance. The matter could have been settled amicably, but her father had made difficulties; he insisted on Sakaram getting divided from the family and living with his wife in a separate house of his own. He also insisted on Sakaram's breaking off all relations with Lalita. He might have addressed the waves of the sea for all the notice which Sakaram took of these demands; he would not give up Lalita; as for breaking away from his brothers, the suggestion was an impertinence. Well-intentioned friends hoped that the filing of a suit need not be allowed to make any difference and that a settlement might be reached before the case came on for trial, but Kamakshi Bai's father, who had a tradesman's mind and lost sight of the major features of a case by insisting too calculatingly on the money side of it, demanded that the Athawars should make reparation to him for all the expenses incurred by him in maintaining his daughter during the period of her

neglect by her husband. The Athawars retorted that he was under no legal obligation to maintain a married daughter of his and that they did not propose to reimburse him to any extent.

The case had been filed against all the Athawar brothers for, though Sakaram was the man really bound to maintain his wife and, therefore, to answer the claim, yet as he was a member of a joint Hindu family which owned property in common, his brothers shared his liability. In August, a beginning was made with the trial of the case. Kamakshi Bai, as the plaintiff, went into the box and deposed against her husband. Though she did not attempt to make out a case of deliberate cruelty, she provided enough material whereon to found a case of neglect and desertion amounting in law to cruelty such as would justify her claim. Her father gave evidence on her side and the case was adjourned to November for hearing the evidence which might be tendered on behalf of the defendants. The judge himself suggested that the parties had better consider the advisability of coming to terms and avoiding the continuation of the unsavoury publicity of a trial. The Athawars, whose dread of the law was sensibly increased by their experience of Kamakshi Bai's case, withdrew a good many points in their defence; indeed, their lawyer was in a fever of anxiety lest in their abnormal fear of the procedure of the law courts the Athawars should surrender all along the line.

It is more than probable that his fears would have come true had not the sequel been taken out of their hands in a wholly unexpected fashion. Early in November, Sakaram had an attack of influenza. As

he lay recovering, he broke the doctor's directions in regard to his diet and very indiscreetly took liberties with his body which introduced complications. Insufficient protection against the monsoon winds brought on a chill which soon developed into pneumonia. Sakaram was a bad patient and the malady got out of hand; quite suddenly, as it seemed, the Athawars realised that Sakaram was dying. The illness itself could have been brought under control but there was some lack of resistance in his constitution which, as in the case of his sister Susila, paralysed action in the end. In his last moments, Sakaram sent for Lalita and made her a gift of all his mother's jewels.

"Keep them for my sake, Lalita," he said in a feeble voice, "I knew a mother's love once and since I grew to man's estate it is your love that I have known. Some of these jewels were worn by queens in former days. After they came into my family they adorned the necks of Athawar ladies and the last of them to wear them was my mother who was more than a queen in grace and dignity of bearing; and when I am dead and gone I should like you to wear them, you, Lalita, my queen."

Lalita was too dazed by the thought of her lover's approaching death even to apprehend what Sakaram was saying. Her cheeks were pressed against his and the tears flooded her eyes. Sakaram called in Raghunath and told him of his death-bed gift to Lalita and begged him to carry out his wishes, and Raghunath, with tears in his eyes, promised faithfully.

In the early hours of the morning the spirit flew out of Sakaram's wasted body. Once again Athawar

House was turned into a house of sorrow. Gopinath was speechless with grief and bewailed the cruel fate which had cut off his half-brother in the prime of his life while he, Gopinath, lay there ready to meet his Maker. The women were inconsolable. Aunt Tholasi sat by the side of her dead nephew, holding her head in her hands, far too tired to weep or join in any demonstration of grief. Her niece, Sona, came and laid her head on her lap, unable to bear her sorrow. Choking, Aunt Tholasi pressed her wrinkled face against Sona's and murmured, "It is Ugrasena's wife's curse working itself out. Oh, God! have mercy upon my poor lambs! And may it please you to make it my turn next!"

Sakaram's death put an entirely new complexion upon Kamakshi Bai's claim for maintenance; her father stiffened in his attitude and declined to abate one jot or tittle in the amount of his daughter's claim. Though he had pretended to hold out when friends intervened with terms of a settlement, he had always intended to give in at the end. He had cherished a secret hope that, in spite of the litigation, husband and wife might come together; he hoped that with time Sakaram's infatuation for the dancing-woman would wear off and that his daughter would be admitted to the dignity and security of a wife without a rival. His bitterness against Sakaram therefore increased rather than otherwise; he felt that both alive and dead, Sakaram had done him incalculable injury. And he swore to be revenged on Sakaram's family.

To add to his mortification, he heard of the death-bed gift made by Sakaram to Lalita. Kamakshi Bai

was furious; it galled her to think that her husband had preferred the dancing-woman to herself even in the face of Death. Father and daughter took counsel and decided to lay a claim against the dancing-woman for the jewels which Sakaram had given her on his death-bed. They asserted their belief that the so-called gift was a hole-and-corner transaction and that the dancing-woman had taken unfair advantage of a dying man. They discussed the matter with their lawyer and he pointed out a difficulty in the way of accepting their theory.

"Sakaram Rao died at Athawar House surrounded by the entire family. How could the dancing-woman have worked upon him without their getting to know of it? Or again, how could she have taken away the jewels without their knowledge?"

Kamakshi Bai offered an explanation. "I think they must all have acted together. I am sure they are going to share the jewels with the dancing-girl. For the moment they want to keep the jewels out of my reach and they have invented this story of a death-bed gift."

The explanation was barely plausible but her father and her lawyer proceeded to act on that assumption. Lalita and the Athawars were notified of Kamakshi Bai's intention to litigate her claim for the jewels in the event of the jewels not being sent to her immediately. Lalita's first impulse was to return the jewels to the family but she thought she owed it to her dead lover to keep them for herself. She keenly resented the slur cast upon her lover by his widow; and she thought, "It is the wretched jewels she cares about really and always did." In her own mind she looked

upon herself as the wedded wife of Sakaram and as a widow by his death. She felt that she had made a truer wife to him than the one who had been married to him before sacrificial fire and priest. She sent a reply to Kamakshi Bai through her lawyer repudiating the charges made against her; she said that Sakaram had, of his own free will, in the presence of his brothers, made a gift of his mother's jewels to her in consideration of her loyalty, fidelity and service; and declared that she would be dead before she would surrender possession of them to Kamakshi Bai.

"How do you expect the elephant to disgorge the chunk of sugarcane which has gone into its mouth," observed Rama Rao and instructed his lawyer at Kedaram to file an action for the recovery of his jewels on the ground that they really belonged to Kamakshi Bai and that Lalita had obtained unlawful possession of them with the assistance of the Athawar brothers.

The case came before a judge who had a passion for quick disposals. Lalita went into the box and told her story with simple directness. The case attracted a good deal of attention, for Lalita was a celebrity—the famous dancing-girl, now in the prime of her beauty, who had abjured the society of men and devoted herself entirely to her art, of which, by common consent, she was the most talented exponent in the south country. A vast crowd had gathered in the court to watch this duel between the discarded wife and the beloved mistress. When Kamakshi Bai's lawyer, a conceited-looking man of middle age, who had a thoroughly undeserved reputation for unearthing points of law on which to break the best of cases, rose to cross-

examine, the interest became intense. Lalita stood in the box, cool and self-possessed, dressed in a cream-coloured *sari* with a broad margin of silver lace, and with a single rose in her plaited hair. The beautiful diamond necklace and the emerald ring which Sakaram had given her in the days of his early love flashed from her moulded throat and delicate fingers. Kamakshi Bai's lawyer questioned her about these. "You aren't claiming them now, are you?" asked the judge.

"No, your honour," was the reply.

"Then please do not waste the time of the Court with questions concerning them."

The lawyer smiled unbeaten; testy judges or cock-sure witnesses, he knew he could wear them all down in the end. He explained that it was necessary for him to go into that matter to show that the woman had been sufficiently compensated for her services and that the story of the death-bed gift could not, therefore, be true.

"What's the value of the jewels already presented?" asked the judge.

Both sides agreed that the value would be something in the neighbourhood of ten thousand rupees.

"How long was the first defendant in Sakaram Rao's keeping?"

"For over twelve years, your honour. Ever since 1920," replied Lalita's vakil.

"And what's the value of the jewels in suit?"

"Three thousand rupees, your honour."

"What was left of the wreck," interposed Kamakshi Bai's Vakil, with needless malice.

"When was the last gift made?" asked the judge.

Lalita's lawyer passed the question on to Lalita who

said that it must have been more than seven years before.

"And for nearly five years, you contend, you got nothing from Sakaram Rao?" asked Kamakshi Bai's lawyer triumphantly.

"I do," replied Lalita firmly.

"And do you expect the Court to believe that you placed your body at the disposal of Sakaram Rao for that length of time without getting anything from him in return?"

"It is not for me to say whether the Court will believe me or not. I swear before God that I never expected anything from Sakaram Rao. I gave him freely of my love and he returned it in equal measure."

"Love!" exclaimed the lawyer derisively. "What do you know of love?"

Lalita's reply came quick and smashing. "A great deal more than what some wedded wives or their lawyers know."

There was a suppressed titter among those present and Kamakshi Bai's lawyer, looking foolish, appealed to the Court to keep the witness in check. The judge told him that, if he addressed an ethical question to the witness, he must take the answer which was given. The Athawars' lawyer caught Raghunath's eye with something that was almost a wink; it looked any odds on Lalita.

But the case had still a long way to go, a long long way. Kamakshi's lawyer, realising that bluster would not pay, settled down to that slow witness-torture of which he was a renowned exponent. He questioned and re-questioned; he put the same question in two, three,

ten different forms. At first Lalita was alert and confident; but after the first hour she grew indifferent and answered without thinking; at the end of the second the Athawars' lawyer was watching her with an expression of something like alarm. It was obvious that the enemy tactics were succeeding; Lalita was tired, played-out, distressed, longing only to be done with it at any cost. She took in the scene but vaguely—the rickety witness-box; the lean, haggard peon with his tattered *davali* thrown across his shirt; the wooden benches whereon sat the long-coated lawyers, mostly hard-faced, all staring at her; the musty law-books on the table; the creak of the *punkah* contending with the scratch of the Judge's pen. She was weary of it all, weary; she thought, "My Sakaram is dead; why are we doing all this?" And still this remorseless, grim-faced man questioned and questioned. Her lawyer, acutely uncomfortable and anxious, tried to gain her all the respite he could, jumping up on every possible technicality. But Kamakshi's vakil saw that his well-tried methods were paying; he had the woman beaten, played-out, sick of it. He picked up his bludgeon again.

"Now look here, woman. I put it to you that you sponged on your lover while he lived and you want to batten on his family now he is dead. Is that your game or is it not?"

Lalita's lawyer, scandalised by the brazen brutality of the question, started up in his seat with an appeal. But he was too late; Lalita was finished. She woke suddenly from her langour, looked Kamakshi's lawyer

full in the face for a good minute and then turning to the Judge said in a clear voice,

"I withdraw my defence. I shall return the jewels to whosoever may be entitled to them. I swear they were a free gift to me, but I do not wish Sakaram Rao's name dragged in the dirt any longer. I had his love; let the lady have the jewels. I go."

And while her lawyer still stood half-upright in his seat, while the Judge was beginning a kind exhortation to think again, while Raghunath was hurrying to her side, she stepped down from the witness-box and walked out of the Court and out of the case and out of the Athawars' lives.

CHAPTER XXX.

In the July, after his return from Tirupati, Raghunath definitely took the plunge. The results of the Intermediate Examination had been announced and Sona had passed with distinction. The marriage season was at an end and there could be no thought of marriage till the season came round again and the question was, what was to be done with Sona in the meanwhile. Sona's own inclinations were that she should go up for her B.A. If that was to be done, the only course was to send her to Madras to join one of the colleges for women. The Athawars set themselves up against the idea, holding that enough harm had already been done to Sona in the name of education and that the only decent thing to do was to keep her at home, pending her marriage, which was bound to come off sooner or later. Raghunath thought over the matter and decided to send her to Queen Mary's College even if the world should come crashing down over his head. Miss Lall came to Athawar House to see her old pupil and supported her case.

Vaman, whom the sight of an educated woman generally scared away, took his courage in his hands and entered a determined caveat. He said with his usual pontifical assurance,

"Education is not good for girls. It makes them mannish, disobedient and rude."

Miss Lall, with an appearance of pained surprise, observed:

"I am sorry to hear you say so. I am afraid Sona must have been very naughty."

"No," Vaman hastened to assure her. "She is all right. I was only speaking generally."

"Are not uneducated women mannish, rude and disobedient sometimes?"

"They sometimes are," admitted Vaman.

"You will therefore grant, my dear sir, that those unlovely traits which you mention are not the result of a liberal education?"

Vaman could not answer. His wife Saku Bai, with her *sari* tucked up above her knees, the picture of competent housewifery, eased the situation.

"Why do you blame education for the faults which are really given to a person at his birth? In which school was Girija Bai educated, Girija Bai, who led Susila a dog's life? Where did the wasp-tongued Sadasiva Rao's mother receive her schooling? The mean-minded cat slandering her neighbours till they are not left with a rag on! We saw Chatterji's wife the other day. They say she is a B.A. and a very clever lady. I can swear I have not met a sweeter woman in my life. You must have seen the way in which she prostrated herself before Aunt Tholasi and asked for a blessing. If Sona feels like reading on, let her do so. Here is this lady who pleads for her as if she were her own daughter. After all, what good can Sona do, cooling her heels at home? We unschooled women do not make such a tremendous success of our lives that we have any right to turn up our noses at a girl who loves learning."

Miss Lall was swept off her feet. Here was a lady,

obviously respectable and orthodox, with no claim even to an elementary education, coming to grips with the problem in hand and giving her decision with competent self-reliance, while the men hesitated or took up unthinkingly a hostile attitude. Vaman, who always lost his tongue whenever his wife took charge of a situation, subsided into his shell. Aunt Tholasi, to the surprise not indeed of Raghunath, but of the rest of the family, said that she saw no objection to the course, only she desired that arrangements should be made for Sona's being kept in every comfort at Madras. The family were averse to the idea of her going into a hostel; she was too delicately brought up to be set amid what they considered was the rough-and-tumble of hostel life; but though they played with the idea of setting up a home in Madras, they had to give it up as unworkable in their financial position. So a hostel it had to be and Raghunath himself took Sona to Madras and installed her in the hostel attached to Queen Mary's. He called at the Theosophical Society at Adyar and had an interview with Mrs. Besant. Since the family fell on bad days, his visits to Madras had been few and far between; and Mrs. Besant was pleased to see her old *protege* and was delighted to hear how successful Sona had been at school and at college. She complimented him upon having done his duty so faithfully by his daughter and when Raghunath let her into the secret about Venkatramani, Mrs. Besant gave the idea her instant blessing. When Raghunath returned home to Kedaram he returned with a lighter heart than he had carried for many months past.

But hostel life did not agree with Sona; the accumu-

lated tragedies of her house had played havoc with her nerves. She was not in the best of health and Anantakrishna's wife insisted on Sona's spending the rest of the term in their fine Madras house. Anantakrishna was now a Secretary to Government. Lakshmi Ammal was more than a mother to Sona and managed to take her very much out of herself. Anantakrishna himself often carried her off of an evening for a drive on the Marina or to the pictures of which she was very fond; or to garden-parties, where her rich loveliness and surpassing grace of movement extorted admiring notice. More than once, he had been asked by his European friends whether she was his daughter and some, bolder than the rest, had suggested that he might well make a daughter of her. Kindly gossip soon took a hand in the matter and it came to be rumoured that she was intended for Venkatramani. It was only an intelligent guess, but it upset Anantakrishna all the same. Since coming to Madras, Anantakrishna's views had undergone a sea-change. He had been introduced to a social world of whose existence he had been but vaguely aware. At evening parties and at Government House functions he had been brought into touch with the realm of women and he was surprised at the ease with which young women, whom he had till then only associated with the pastoral delights of a country fireside or the sober life of the home, took their place among the men and women of different nationalities. Their sparkle, their knowledgeableness and charm were a revelation to him and the idea of a union between his son and Sona seemed less bizarre than it had seemed in the *mofussil*. He had seen Sona move in the social

world of the city and he was pleased with what he saw. Anything but pert, free from the devastating smartness which some of her sex consciously displayed, the essential woman in her shone brightly and charmingly. But doubts in turn fell thick and fast upon him and then he would check himself and stop thinking of what seemed to him so right and proper. He told himself that if he did not have a care he would find himself in the opposite camp and he reminded himself that it was necessary to place a guard upon one's soul to avoid going over to the enemy.

April saw a family reunion at Kedaram. The Branksomes, who were due to go home on furlough, were sent to Kedaram in a short vacancy; Venkatramani, who was posted to his old sub-division of Mel-Poppali, applied for a month's leave and spent it at Kedaram; Anantakrishna came for a few days before Government moved up to Ooty. Sona was back at Athawar House for the long vacation which had just begun. But there was a sense of want in Venkatramani's heart and both Anantakrishna and his wife perceived it. It was beginning to exercise their minds seriously. Venkatramani had no notion which way his father and mother were tending but he made up his mind he would not wait much longer. In his own private heart he decided he would take the bit between his teeth and bolt.

But the Branksomes took a hand in the matter.

Anantakrishna called on the Branksomes and Mrs. Branksome, who was in Venkatramani's secret, proceeded to tackle him. She argued the matter with him and used every art to persuade him to agree to his

son's wish. Mrs. Branksome had met Sona and had been perfectly charmed with her.

"It would be a sin of the first magnitude should you stand in the way of the young people's happiness, Mr. Anantakrishna Aiyar. I am surprised that a man like you could take up such an obscurantist attitude."

"Softly, my dear," genially remonstrated her husband. "You know the Government's attitude in such matters. Strict religious neutrality has been promised by Queen Victoria in her Proclamation. So, mind what you are doing."

Anantakrishna hastened to assure his friends that he was not going to mistake their meaning. He told them rather weakly that he saw nothing wrong in the proposal, but he had his father to consider, who was a man of the old school.

"Not more than you are," remarked Mrs. Branksome.

Anantakrishna lost in argument. Mrs. Branksome routed him completely and made him admit it would be sinful to refuse permission where heart and head were in rare accord. As Anantakrishna rose to leave, Branksome asked him gently:

"Do you remember the motto of your college, Anantakrishna?"

"Yes, Mr. Branksome:

'They are slaves who dare not be
In the right with two or three'."

"I only wanted to remind you of that, Anantakrishna," said Branksome.

As was his way whenever an intricate problem arose for quick decision, Anantakrishna went for a long walk

and when he returned home he told his wife that he had made up his mind to withdraw his objections to Venkatramani's marriage with Sona. Lakshmi Ammal, the least aggressive of women, was relieved that her husband had changed his mind; she had travelled a long way from the attitude of opposition which she had instinctively adopted at the first mention of the idea. Mother love, on the one hand, and wifely obedience on the other, counselled acceptance of the decision. But she saw difficulties ahead. There was old Anantarama Aiyar to consider; and the Athawars must consent to the union. Would they?

"It is all one-sided yet. I am not sure the Athawars will agree," she said sadly.

"I rather think we can bring them round. Raghunath is anxious for the marriage and that's something to work upon," replied Anantakrishna.

"But that does not carry us very far. There's Gopinath, Aunt Tholasi and Vaman."

Anantakrishna was alive to the difficulties. He said slowly. "Let us try. In any case I must tell my father first. If he doesn't agree, of course the whole thing goes."

Anantakrishna had a feeling that his father would give in; the step could not meet with his wholehearted approval but, at the same time, Anantarama Aiyar was not the sort who would seek to impose his will upon the younger generation whose battle had to be fought by themselves. Still, it would go against the grain for Anantarama Aiyar to give his consent; with unexpected catches in his voice Anantakrishna laid the case before his father and waited for his answer.

Anantarama Aiyar, who knew what was coming, smiled; Anantakrishna at first thought it was the resigned smile of the man who had to swallow a lump, but he soon perceived it was a really a smile of encouragement. Starting on a note of apology, Anantakrishna ended with a passionate plea in favour of the proposed union. Anantarama had just finished his morning devotions and the single orange which provided his breakfast lay on a silver salver in front of him. He took it in his hand and proceeded to remove the rind, apparently buried in thought.

"But what about the Athawars? Are they agreeable?" he asked.

"Raghunath, of course, is all for it. We have to tackle Gopinath," said Anantakrishna.

"And that will take some doing. Like me, he is an old-fashioned man."

There was a smile on Anantarama Aiyar's face which saved his remark from any suspicion of sarcasm.

Reassured, Anantakrishna said:

"Your approval, I hope, will influence his decision. In any case, I can act if you let me."

"Do, Anantakrishna, and tell Gopinath that I desire the alliance. That may reconcile him to the idea. I am sure it will all turn out well."

As he expressed his conviction the friendly bells of Kedareswar set up a rousing peal.

The decision, so far, had been one-sided; Athawar House had not yet been consulted. Of course, Raghunath had brought up the matter now and again in conversation with Gopinath; but the head of the house would listen in silence and then suddenly change the

subject as if afraid of finding himself in agreement.

Now, Anantakrishna called at Athawar House and tackled Gopinath squarely on the point. He felt that Gopinath was held back by fears as to what Vaman and Aunt Tholasi would say. Vaman, he knew, would be difficult; but Aunt Tholasi, he anticipated, might give way more easily. Her agreement would weaken Vaman's opposition; at any rate, after an interval of sullenness and gloom he would surrender, at least as far as surrender was possible to one of his captious nature. Anantakrishna hoped that, in the last resort, his services over the Swami affair might temper Vaman's attitude.

In a sense, then, Aunt Tholasi held the key to the position; if she consented, the rest would be easy sailing. That she had relaxed considerably, though unwillingly, from her earlier attitude, was known to Anantakrishna but it was still a toss-up as to how she would take it when it came to the scratch. However, she was easier to tackle than anticipated. She lifted her aged head and asked:

"What does Anantarama say?"

Anantakrishna and Raghunath told her that Anantarama Aiyar had agreed and his decision solved her own difficulties. Anantarama was the only link with that past which had faded now almost to a dream, and woman-like, she thought that what was good for Anantarama was good for her too. But she felt that this was a matter in which Gopinath should decide of his own free will.

"If Anantakrishna and Gopinath agree, I shall have nothing to say against it. How I wish Venkatramani could marry Sona!"

"That is right," shouted somebody in the street to somebody else.

The group looked up in gratified surprise, and they craned their heads to see who was speaking. Nobody was in sight and, to them, it was a disembodied voice, heaven-sent, a sign that the proposal was blessed by the gods.

Vaman was an obstructionist to the last; he screwed up his hatchet-face into its sourest expression and holding up his folded hands in front of him, said:

"For Heaven's sake, leave me alone. I have no concern with these things."

"You shouldn't say that, Vaman," remonstrated Anantakrishna. "Aunt Tholasi, you know, has given her consent."

"She is helpless and feels she must bow before the storm. What cannot be cured must be endured. Poor Aunt Tholasi!"

Anantakrishna did not press him further. The ice had been broken and that was good so far as it went. But, meanwhile, if Gopinath could be brought round, Vaman might relent. Anantakrishna had to join up at Ooty but he met Gopinath just before leaving Kedaram.

"Is your father eager?" asked Gopinath wistfully.

"He has given the proposal his blessing. He wanted me to tell you he desired the alliance and hopes you will agree."

"Does he?" asked Gopinath, and his face brightened up. "His blessing counts for a great deal."

He lapsed into silence as doubts began to assail him.

"There is Vaman; he may not agree. And Aunt Tholasi—It's all so difficult, Anantakrishna. It has never been done before."

"That is no reason why it should not be done now. There is nothing in reason against it or in the *shastras* either."

"I know, I know," said Gopinath sadly. "But we have to carry everybody with us. It's a great responsibility, Anantakrishna."

"So it is, and we must shoulder it. I doubted and wavered, but I saw I was merely weak, too much blinded to see reason. You know, Gopinath, that the children really desire it?"

"I know. I have known it all along."

He turned in his bed with a sigh.

"To me, that is the supreme consideration, Gopinath."

Gopinath lay back on his cushions sunk in thought. It was reasonable, it was sane; but could one set up one's own sanity against received practice?

"*A* consideration, Anantakrishna," he said. "An important consideration. But not the supreme one. No."

CHAPTER XXXI.

April was over and Anantakrishna was hard at work at Stonehouse Hill. He had not been able to get away to Kedaram as he had hoped, though his wife was pressing him to strike while the iron was hot. A remarkable amount of agreement had been reached; Gopinath's waverings were proof of his real support of the idea and he only needed to be talked into approving of what everybody concerned believed to be the right course. This, however, was easier said that done; how was Gopinath to rid himself of his hesitations, his paralysing doubts? And, Vaman, "Oh, Vaman, that awful stick-in-the-mud", thought Anantakrishna in vexation. But he could not be left out of account. Was he to be the confounded rock on which the happiness of his son was to split? The answer seemed to be an appalling affirmative, unless God in His mercy should make a clearing in the path. Anantakrishna, who was hardly a religious man and never gave his Maker any length of conscious consecutive thought, found himself driven to seek help from that quarter. He was vexed, impatient; uncommonly impatient for one who rarely allowed material things to defeat him, who habitually prided himself on rising unconcernedly above the storm of circumstance.

At Kedaram, Gopinath's health was causing great anxiety. He had seemed to improve in March, but the improvement had not been kept up and when the hot weather came on, he wilted like a flower. Anantakrishna's talk in early April had made a deep impression

upon him and was the main substance of his thoughts during the succeeding weeks. He was up against all the old arguments against a union between persons of different communities; custom, the *shastras* or rather, their currently accepted interpretation; what people would say; Vaman, nearer home, and Aunt Tholasi; everything and everybody seemed to raise a finger of warning against the idea. But was all that conclusive? he asked himself. They seemed made for each other, Venkatramani and Sona, and seemed to desire each other so keenly. It would be a sin of the first magnitude to keep them apart. Or, would it be a sin not to? It was all so confusing, so disturbing.

The anniversary of Sakaram's death came round, reviving the shock which had prostrated Gopinath after the tragedy. He thought lovingly of his half-brother, his sweet melodies and his beautiful, blasted life. It seemed to be the lid on the cup of the family misfortunes. The family! Yes, the family survived, but was seemingly going to pieces. The sale of a portion of the Athawar lands had been the bitterest pill Gopinath had had to swallow in recent years, and he reproached himself keenly, if unfairly, for it. It was tampering with the family inheritance; it was proof of his mismanagement of the family estate. But how could that be, he asked himself. Never an anna wasted, never a *pice* misspent. Extravagant, maybe—but how could one give up the old ways? It was the times that had changed, changing as ever for the worse. Still, there it was—a portion of the family lands gone—that lovely stretch between the Dakshina Nermada and the Nilaveni. He thought of the scandal arising out of

Kamakshi Bai's suit; poor Sakaram, poor Kamakshi—they could yet have come together. Had Sakaram lived, time would have healed the sore. But there it was, a heritage of scandal, left by the current generation of Athawars. It was more than he could bear.

All these incidents, acting on an enfeebled mind, weakened his resistance to the disease which was wasting his body. It began as a feeling of nausea, a queer sensation in the pit of the stomach; a fever came on and would not be arrested and Gopinath knew he had not many more days to live. He decided he would have the family around him; thank Heaven, they at least were all in perfect health and strength. Athawar House had not after all done them badly; his own daughters were flourishing—Uma, married from Athawar House, best of all; Vaman had a robust family which removed apprehensions for the future of his line; Sona was a marvel of beauty and good sense. Telegrams were sent, calling up the children who were in different parts of the country. Sona was at Madras and lost no time in hastening to comfort her uncle in his dying moments. She was the first to arrive and nursed him with loving care. Clean sheets, towelling daily renewed, medicine bottles, food in perfect order, the whole room spick and span—it made dying worth while, said Gopinath, a delightful patient who, for all his worldly cares, seemed to defy death. He was glad to have Sona by, Sona, in one sense his special favourite because she had been so much at home. He had missed her intensely; his evenings had not been the same since she left; he was comforted now by hearing her sing to him the hymns of Kabir and Tulasi Doss. Since

Sakaram's death, there was no one to play the *vina* except Sona, and she played it with skill. She had Sakaram's deftness of touch, the same capacity to make the instrument yield soft rhythms. The weaker Gopinath grew, the more he asked to have Sona by his side, reading, singing, playing the *vina.*

"Play me *Vaisāka Māsa,* Sona," he asked when the long evening was deepening into twilight. It was the time of the *Chaitrotsavam,* the festival of Spring and Gopinath, for all his weakness, caught the gaiety of the season and asked for the song he loved best. Sona elaborated the tune beforehand and played the air.

"Āmrāsava pyevuni gāna-karthi-kokila" repeated Gopinath. "You are my *kokil,* Sona dear. Won't you be sorry when I die?" he asked childishly.

"Oh! Uncle!" was all she could say.

Gopinath became silent; he was busy with his thoughts. A *kokil* in the Spring is happy. Drinks the sweet honey from the flowers and calls to its mate. And is my Sona to be content with playing to a dying man?

"Sona, dear," he asked suddenly, "would you like to marry Venkatramani?"

Sona averted her eyes.

"Answer me, child," insisted Gopinath, "I want to know."

Never was a maiden compelled to such a confession of preference in seriousness. But Sona could never play at being bashful too long. She looked the dying man in the face and answered, simply, "Yes, uncle dear."

Gopinath drew her nearer to him, and placing his withered hand on her head, muttered a blessing and, his eyes swimming, said, "May it be so."

That night neither Sona nor Gopinath slept; and early next morning when she brought his medicine, Sona saw that her uncle was far weaker. He took a few sips from the cup but the effort was too much for him. He drew Sona's hands and placed them on his heart; looking up at her with a sad intentness, he said,

"All night I was thinking of your playing of *Vaisāka Māsa,* Sona. How sweetly you played! Will you play *Saveri* to me."

Trembling, half-afraid, half-hopeful, she said, "Yes, uncle, of course," and hurried for her *vina.* It lay there, its strings showing bright against the carven gourd. But in the interval Gopinath's feeble will had shifted; he called out,

"No, dear. I am always thinking of myself. You please go and send in your father."

Raghunath entered leisurely but his pace quickened sharply after one glance at Gopinath's face. Gopinath said,

"Sit down by me, Raghunath. Where is Anantakrishna?"

"At Ooty, *dada.*"

"Why hasn't he been here? He said he would be coming about now."

"He is busy. They are making a new Act. He will come."

"Send for him, Raghunath. Wire for him. I want to tell him Sona may marry Venkatramani."

Raghunath's heart gave a great leap—whether from joy or surprise he hardly knew.

"Dada!" was all he could say.

"It is all right. It is all as it should be. I am seeing better now. I know. . . . Send for Venkatramani too."

Raghunath laid a tentative hand on his brother's shoulder, feeling the bone through the wasted flesh.

"Never mind all that. All that can wait, *dada.* First you must get well—"

"I will not get well. I know it. You know it. Send the wires." His voice failed suddenly, his eyes began to stare. "Promise me you will send the wires. Now!"

Raghunath said, as solemnly as he had ever said anything,

"I promise, *dada.*"

"Then go. Go!"

A little bemused, not quite sure whether he stood on his head or his feet, Raghunath drew on his shirt and *angavastram* and went hurrying out into the bright sunshine. In the street, cheerful with familiar noises, he turned to look at Athawar House, Gopinath's Athawar House. He remembered the old, old days of its buying—all the talk, all the hopes. Now in a few hours, he thought, it will have a new head; but not such another, not such another.

The bright street blurred suddenly before his eyes; then, pulling himself together, he hitched his *angavastram* and strode resolutely towards the Telegraph Office to send off his wires.